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THE KEYSTONE OF EUROPE

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THE KEYSTONE OF EUROPE

HISTORY OF THE BELGIAN DYNASTY
1830-1939

BY

EMILE CAMMAERTS

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P R E F A C E

THE purpose of this book is to place within reach of the English-reading public the story of the foundation and development of independent Belgium, from 1830 to the present day.

Apart from a few specialists, foreign readers are only interested in a small State in so far as it affects the life of their own country or of Europe in general. It happens that, owing to her geographical position, Belgium has, on several occasions, played a most important part in European history and will, in all probability, play such a part again.

The paradox of Belgium lies in the fact that, while her size appears insignificant, her destiny is intimately bound up with that of Great Britain, France and Germany. Her independence was finally recognized by the Powers in 1830, after the revolution which divided the Netherlands. Belgium was then called the "Keystone of Europe," and her integrity considered by many statesmen as the essential condition of European peace. Future events confirmed this view, more particularly the outbreak of the Great War after the violation of the Belgian frontiers.

The reaction which followed diminished, for a time, the importance of the Belgian problem. The League of Nations created a new system of collective security opposed to the Balance of Power which was thought to be, with monarchy and "secret diplomacy," one of the principal causes of the conflict. Belgium ceased to be a "keystone" and became merely one of the many stones of the Balance of Peace. Neutrality, which had been for so long the country's safeguard, was considered as incompatible with the Covenant

and the Kellogg Pact. Mr. Stimson, the American statesman, did not hesitate to declare that, war being an "unlawful act," neutrality itself had become "obsolete."

During recent years, however, the system of the League has been considerably weakened and it is recognized to-day that the Covenant is no longer a sufficient guarantee of security. The doctrine of the Balance of Power proscribed by Post-war diplomacy is reasserting itself in Europe, and neutrality is gaining ground everywhere. Belgium and most of the smaller States have been compelled to reconsider their situation and to strengthen their defences. The trend of policy, interrupted by the War and the after-War periods, has been resumed and public attention is once more turned to Belgium, one of the danger spots on the map of Europe.

The subject of this book is therefore not only of historical but also of immediate importance.

Belgium is mainly known to the world by her Sovereigns. Leopold I, Leopold II, Albert I, Leopold III are all popular figures. In establishing and consolidating the country's independence, creating her colony, defending her against the invader, restoring her international independence, they have rendered outstanding services and won the gratitude of their people. While warning and sheltering their country against the dangers which threatened her, they showed themselves good patriots and good Europeans. They were, and they remain, the guardians and defenders of the "keystone."

The world is confronted to-day not only with dangerous international difficulties, but also with grave constitutional problems. Public opinion is divided between partisans and adversaries of the individualistic liberal regime, on the one side, and of State absolutism, on the other. While the excesses of certain dictatorships are only too apparent, the

conduct of public affairs in certain democratic countries is not above criticism. Monarchy, which was considered at one time the innocuous survival of the old kingship, appears now as one of the strongest safeguards of constitutionalism. While remaining the guardian of the Constitution, the Sovereign stands above class and party. His influence, in times of crisis, strengthens the hands of the Executive. In him, a modern nation can find sufficient unity of direction and purpose to avoid the abuses of party politics and the oppression of autocracy.

The growing importance of constitutional monarchy has been made evident during the last twenty years in Holland and Scandinavia, and especially in Great Britain where the institution is more deeply rooted than anywhere else. In Belgium, the change introduced by the extension of the franchise at the end of the last century is particularly apparent. In spite of Republican influences, the monarchy preserved and increased its popularity under the last two Sovereigns. Their interventions during periods of political or financial crises are significant in the light of recent political developments.

Both in internal and external affairs, Belgium owes so much to her dynasty that it has become impossible to trace her history without sketching at the same time the life and character of her Sovereigns. It seems almost as if each of them had been specially predestined to play, at the appointed time, his particular part in furthering the country's interests and preserving her independence.

It would be pretentious to load a historical sketch such as this with a ponderous bibliography. The most important works referring to the pre-war period are mentioned in the footnotes. When dealing with the last four years, the author was confronted with serious difficulties, as these events have not yet been recorded in any comprehensive work. He

would have been unable to overcome them without the help of Baron Capelle, the King's Secretary, who placed important documents at his disposal—some of them hitherto unpublished.

The author wishes to express his deep gratitude to H.M. King Leopold for allowing him to give an account of an interview, in the course of which the Sovereign explained his views on the causes of international conflicts, and the reasons which have prompted his efforts for the maintenance of European peace, during the last years.

CHAPTER I

THE KEYSTONE OF EUROPE

I

THE collapse of Napoleon at Waterloo was followed by a period of reaction which subordinated the interests of the people to those of their Government. The pious terms in which the Holy Alliance had been concluded in 1815 between the Tsar, the Emperor of Austria and the King of Prussia, did not deceive Europe. Neither did the righteous resolutions adopted, three years later, by the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle, concerning the sanctity of international treaties. Law and religion only served to mask the intention of the Powers to maintain the territorial *status quo* and to prevent democratic tendencies from threatening the privileges of the governing classes and the absolute rule of the princes. Both were enlisted to buttress the system established at Vienna.

This system had scarcely taken into consideration the rights and aspirations of smaller nations, and public opinion, which, in Western Europe, could no longer accept absolutism and craved for constitutional guarantees. Poland had once more been sacrificed, the Belgian provinces had been placed under the sovereignty of the House of Orange, and the social ideals stirred by the French Revolution had been suppressed everywhere. The wish of the diplomats assembled in Vienna had not only been to maintain France within her old frontiers, but also to wipe out the results of the last twenty-five years, which had transformed the political outlook of Europe.

It took only fifteen years to show how vain this wish had been.

In 1830 a wave of revolutions and insurrections passed over the Continent. France, who had been more deeply affected, was the first to rebel against an attempt made by her Bourbon King to restore the Old Regime. In July the streets of Paris were covered with barricades, Charles X was forced to abdicate and, early in August, Louis-Philippe, Duke of Orleans, was proclaimed King. A strictly constitutional monarchy succeeded the would-be absolute rule of the "Legitimists." Had the new sovereign shown any territorial ambition at the time, a new Alliance would no doubt have been concluded against him, but he succeeded in persuading the Powers, more particularly England, that he was determined to pursue a moderate policy and to prevent the most advanced section of his followers from threatening the peace of Europe. Under the circumstances, neither England nor Prussia found it necessary to garrison the thirteen fortified places carefully chosen by Wellington, on the southern frontier of Belgium, according to a secret clause of the treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle. The Powers remained expectant.

Their attitude stiffened as soon as they heard that the Belgians had risen in their turn, on August 25th, repulsed the Dutch troops sent against Brussels, and pursued them towards their own frontier. The *Gouvernement provisoire* had decreed the independence of the country and, as early as October 16th, adopted the basis of a new charter, combining the most liberal features of the French, English and American constitutions. This popular revolt did more than bring about a change of dynasty, such as the substitution of the Orleans for the Bourbons. It challenged the whole fabric of the Vienna System by seriously weakening the artificial buffer State established on the northern frontier of France, and by asserting the principle of national inde-

pendence against the policy of territorial annexation applied by the Continental Powers. It altered the internal regime of the country, and brought about a vital change in the map. National aspirations were considered infinitely more dangerous to the stability of Europe than liberal principles. The Belgians not merely refused to acknowledge the power of William of Orange on account of the absolute methods of his government, but because he was a Dutchman and a Protestant, and, as such, unable to sympathize with their national traditions and religion. The misgivings expressed in Vienna by Talleyrand and von Binder concerning the stability of the "United Kingdom" were fully realized.

The reaction of the Conservative Powers bound by the Holy Alliance to protect the *status quo* was immediate. The Tsar was bent on "punishing the ingratitude of the Belgians towards the paternal government of their lawful Sovereign," and crushing a revolutionary movement "which might gain ground rapidly and threaten him if any weakness were to be shown." In answer to the Dutch King's appeal, he mobilized an army in Poland. The King of Prussia, on his side, massed his troops on the Rhine, while Metternich, unable to collaborate with these military preparations, sent pressing notes to his two Allies, urging them to act promptly in defence of the treaties concluded in Vienna and consecrated, three years later, at Aix-la-Chapelle. He was out-and-out for "intervention."

The attitude of England was somewhat different. On the one hand, she was bound to Holland by dynastic ties and by the traditional alliance of the two "Maritime Powers", she had fostered the creation of the United Kingdom, and Wellington, who happened to be at the head of the government, was mainly responsible for the creation of the "barrier" of fortresses intended to check French encroachments in the

North. On the other hand, she stood outside the Holy Alliance and her traditional policy was opposed to intervention. At the Congress of Verona, in 1822, Wellington himself had refused to sanction the French expedition sent to Spain to restore the absolute rule of Ferdinand VII. England had also recognized the independence of the young South American Republics. Besides, Anglo-Dutch relations had lost a great deal of their cordiality, during the last years, owing to the uncompromising character of King William.

The fate of Belgium depended, in those days, on French policy. Louis-Philippe does not cut a heroic figure in history, but he was not devoid of diplomatic talent and could, on certain occasions, display firmness, even obstinacy. He was far more concerned with consolidating his shaky position than with indulging in military adventures, however popular they might be in Paris. He therefore resisted the *Parti du Mouvement*, which included some of his ministers, and exerted his efforts in preventing intervention and conciliating England. He notified both Berlin and Petersburg that he would consider the violation of the Belgian frontier as a *casus belli*, and sent Talleyrand to London, in order to enlist British sympathies.

This most skilful and unscrupulous diplomatist reached England, on September 24th, before the conflict between the Belgian citizens and the Dutch troops had rendered all reconciliation impossible. He hastened to urge upon Wellington and Lord Aberdeen the necessity of avoiding a European conflict by submitting the Belgian question to an international conference convened in London. This was, according to him, the only means of conciliating the wishes of the Belgian people with the legitimate claims of the Powers. The solution favoured by the British Government was some form of administrative separation between Holland and Belgium, safeguarding the rights of the Orange

dynasty. Louis-Philippe's agreement to this plan helped considerably in consolidating the Anglo-French decision not to intervene by force, with which the Conservative Powers were persuaded, however reluctantly, to comply.

The Belgians had won their independence. Would they succeed in preserving it?

2

The historical significance of Belgium, from the early Middle Ages to the present day, may be summed up in three words: "cross-roads," "battle-field" and "keystone."

The country is small, like a market-place, being merely the geographical region where the natural roads of western Europe meet, close to the sea, half-way through the northern plain, in the point of convergence of three large navigable streams, the Scheldt, the Meuse and the Rhine. Given freedom of intercourse and a civilized Europe, it is in Belgium that the traders of Spain, France, Italy, England, Germany and the Baltic were bound to meet. For this reason the ancient port of Bruges became the metropolis of the North, up to the fifteenth century. It played, in the North Sea, the part which Venice played in the Mediterranean, gathering the goods of various lands and spreading them abroad. The discovery of the New World considerably increased the importance of Belgium as a trading centre, Lisbon and Cadiz occupying too eccentric a position to be great ports of transit. Antwerp, which succeeded Bruges, became not only the cross-roads of Europe but the metropolis of the world and the cradle of modern Capitalism. It occupied, in the sixteenth century, a unique position both economically and intellectually. The eclipse which followed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was due

to purely artificial circumstances—the closing of the Scheldt by the Dutch, who inherited Belgian prosperity. As soon as normal conditions could be restored and trade became once more free, Antwerp resumed, to a large extent, its former importance. For, in spite of technical progress and social changes, the ancient roads by sea and land do not alter their course, and their meeting place retains the advantages of its central position.

Unfortunately, the same roads which were followed by merchants could also be followed by soldiers. Accessibility had its drawbacks as well as its advantages. Had the Belgian provinces been ruled by a powerful national prince, like the Belgian principalities in the XVth century, they might have been able to check foreign invasion, but they had become a distant possession of the Hapsburg dynasty and were particularly difficult to defend. They were further weakened by the separation of the Northern from the Southern Netherlands, following the religious wars of the XVIth century. This state of weakness coincided with the growth of strong, centralized states in France and England, and later in Prussia, which preferred to settle their differences on foreign soil. The names of Ramillies, Oudenarde, Malplaquet and Waterloo tell their own story. Those of Fleurus, Neerwinden, Fontenoy and Jemappes, although less popular in this country, are no less significant. Belgium had become the traditional battlefield where the Powers struggled for hegemony at the expense of a people who had everything to lose and nothing to gain by their conflicts.

From most of these international struggles, Belgium emerged diminished economically and territorially. Through the treaty of Munster (1648), the Scheldt was definitely closed to foreign trade and the Dutch obtained a strip of territory on the left bank of the river, as well as the strategic position of Maestricht. A few years later, the

treaty of the Pyrenees ceded Artois and part of the southern provinces to France, who further annexed Walloon Flanders in 1668. In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Southern Netherlands passed under the rule of the Austrian branch of the Hapsburgs, and were obliged to receive foreign garrisons in the fortresses of the "Barrier" erected against France. There only remained a nucleus of the vast possessions of the Dukes of Burgundy, extending from the Zuyder Zee to the Somme, and the distant but still vivid memory of the prestige which the country had enjoyed under their rule.

It was not only for reasons of convenience and accessibility that the Powers had transformed Belgium into the "cockpit of Europe." Since the rise of national rivalries, in the XVIth century, the Southern Netherlands appeared as a strategic position, or "bridgehead," which secured to its conqueror the supremacy in any further conflict. From this jumping-off ground, France, who was the principal disturber of the peace under Louis XIV, might conveniently attack Holland or invade the Rhineland, and conversely, the Allies might threaten the boundaries of France. Antwerp, freed from Dutch tutelage, became a "pistol aimed at the heart of England." The advantages of this central position became evident during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. At the time of the Belgian Revolution, it appeared clearly, in the light of past experiences, that the annexation of the country would jeopardize the Balance of Power and could not be achieved without letting loose once more the dogs of war. And Europe was still weary fifteen years after Waterloo.

Although the damages caused by the Napoleonic Wars cannot be compared with those which resulted from the world conflict of 1914-1918, victors and vanquished had both suffered from their consequences. Even England had

paid heavily for her new prestige. Besides, the restoration of the Old Regime was more apparent than real. The principles proclaimed in 1789 had not been crushed with the French armies. They had become more moderate. Revolution had been changed into Liberalism and the "sovereignty of the people" had been limited by constitutional institutions. The "bourgeoisie" was already asserting its supremacy both over the aristocracy and the labouring class. Extremism and violent methods were at a discount, and the rule of Law was favoured in international as well as in national affairs. If the Holy Alliance and the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle, in 1818, aimed first of all at maintaining a *status quo* favourable to the conquerors, they also emphasized the binding and sacred character of treaties. While attempting to prevent any abrupt change in the Vienna System, International Law wished also to check any endeavour to upset the "balance" on which depended European peace. In spite of the differences separating Conservative and Liberal Powers, they were at one in their desire to avoid a new conflict which might deprive them of the advantages obtained at Vienna and provoke social unrest.

Such was the political atmosphere when the Belgians rebelled against their Dutch ruler. It explains how the British and French Governments agreed so promptly to submit the Belgian question to an international conference and succeeded in persuading the Conservative Powers to do the same, in spite of the Dutch King's protests.

The Conference opened, on November 4th, at the Foreign Office. Wellington, who presided, declared that the first task of the delegates would be to "preserve peace." He proposed the conclusion of a temporary armistice between Belgians and Dutch, pending the solution of their differences. Belgian independence was not yet recognized, but the

“insurgents” were thus given the right to negotiate as “belligerents.” The adoption of the proposal by all the parties concerned was a triumph for the advocates of non-intervention, who were determined that Belgium would not, as so often in the past, become the “battlefield of Europe.” The idea gained ground that if no one attempted to obtain some advantage from the present crisis, peace might be preserved by respecting the land which had for so long been a bone of contention between the Powers. Law might succeed where Force had failed. The plan made in Vienna might be preserved under a new form and the “Keystone” finally set in the vast architecture of Europe.*

3

Such hopes were nearly shattered by a decision taken on November 18th and 24th, by the national Congress in Brussels.

The majority of Congressmen, flushed with the recent successes won by the Belgian volunteers against the Dutch army, were out of touch with reality and had no idea how precarious the situation of the country was at the time. They resented the interference of the Conference in their quarrel with the Dutch King, without realizing that the only alternative to negotiations was a Prussian or Russian invasion. Proud of their historical traditions, they claimed for Belgium the right of an ancient, autonomous people to choose their own form of Government and their own Constitution. They rejected the idea that, by recognizing her independence—when they did so—the foreign diplomats meeting in London would confer a favour upon them; they

* The expression “Keystone of Europe” was first used by Louis-Philippe. See Guizot's *Mémoires*.

would only repair an injustice and the damage caused by two centuries of foreign domination. Europe did not witness the birth of a "new nation" but the resurrection of an old one. "After centuries of slavery," according to the *Brabançonne*, "the Belgians emerged from their grave." While a few learned and wise jurists were drafting the Constitution, many excitable frock-coated deputies lost a great deal of time and energy in defiant speeches and impractical proposals, "as if they were the dictators of Europe."*

This picture of romantic oratory contrasts with the somewhat cynical deliberations of the experienced statesmen gathered at the Foreign Office: Lord Aberdeen, Talleyrand, von Bülow (representing Prussia), Prince Esterhazy and von Wessenberg (Austria), Prince Lieven and Count Matuszewic (Russia), all trained in the subtleties of XVIIIth century diplomacy, playing their hand cunningly and cautiously in the difficult game of world affairs. Some of them had come to London with reluctance, knowing that their chiefs favoured military intervention and the restoration to William of Orange of his Belgian provinces. Others were inclined to satisfy to some extent the insurgents while, however, safeguarding the rights of the Dutch dynasty. Some form of administrative separation between Belgium and Holland was the most liberal "concession" which they were prepared to make, after order had been restored.

Imagine, then, the pained surprise and violent indignation caused, among the delegates, by the news that, not content with confirming "the independence of the Belgian people" without waiting for the Conference's decision, the Congress had also perpetually excluded from the throne "all members of the Orange-Nassau" family. This time intervention and, as its consequence, a general war seemed unavoidable. The Belgian decision wrecked the plan, nursed by Lord Aberdeen

* J. Lobeau, *Souvenirs personnels*.

with Louis-Philippe's approval, of conferring the Regency of the Southern Netherlands on the Prince of Orange, son of the King of Holland. It was taken as a personal insult by the Tsar, who was closely connected with the Dutch reigning family, and as a blatant "breach of public law" by Metternich, who had not given up the hope of crushing the revolution. Even in France the extremists assumed the upper hand, in the new Cabinet presided over by M. Laffitte, and urged the King to take military measures in order to defend the "cause of the revolution." The most ardent supporters of the Belgians had become their worst enemies.

Two important events, which appear as nothing short of providential, saved Belgium from the rash action taken by her representatives: the Polish revolution and the fall of the Tory Government in England.

On hearing that their country was going to be occupied by Russian troops sent against the Belgians, the Poles rebelled against their foreign rulers. The rebellion spread throughout the country and the three Powers who had taken a share in its partition could no longer ignore the danger which threatened them. The Tsar was obliged to keep his army in Poland and to use it against his own subjects, in a struggle which lasted several months. The King of Prussia could no longer afford to maintain his soldiers on the Rhine, and Metternich, faced with insurrection in the North as well as in Italy, had to give up all idea of intervention.

Almost at the same time, after an electoral defeat, the Wellington Cabinet resigned and was replaced by a Liberal Government, under Lord Grey, in which Palmerston filled the post of Foreign Secretary. Palmerston had little sympathy for the Vienna System and favoured a rapprochement with France. He was irritated by the irreconcilable

attitude of the Dutch King, who, after accepting the "suspension of hostilities," refused to evacuate the fortress of Antwerp and to remove the blockade of the Scheldt. After studying the Belgian problem, he was convinced that things had gone too far, on the battlefield and in the Belgian National Congress, to allow the gap to be bridged by administrative separation or any other half-way measure. He was far less anxious than Lord Aberdeen to preserve the sovereign rights of the Orange dynasty. "It is very regrettable," wrote Matuszewic, "that Wellington should go out of power at the moment when his help would be most useful."

The circumstances became thus much more favourable to Belgium. After a heated debate which lasted three days, the Conference adopted the protocol of December 30th, 1830, which recognized the country's future independence, "combined with the stipulations of the treaties, the interest and security of the other Powers and the preservation of the Balance of Power." The non-interventionists had won the day.

Encouraged by this success, the French *Parti du Mouvement* resumed its campaign and the new Foreign Minister, Sébastiani, sent to London semi-official agents, in order to obtain an agreement in favour of partial annexation. Faced by the Dutch King's refusal to comply with the terms of the Armistice, the Belgians, on the other hand, threatened to resume military operations. Both Palmerston and the delegates of the Conservative Powers realized that Belgian independence was but a frail obstacle against French ambitions if it was not strengthened by some definite undertaking. In spite of Talleyrand's resistance, they adopted, on January 20th, 1831, a new protocol declaring Belgium "perpetually neutral" under the Powers' "guarantee."

Neutrality implied a twofold obligation: obligation, on the part of the Powers, not to interfere in Belgium's internal affairs or to pursue against her any annexationist policy; obligation, on the part of Belgium, not to depart from a strict impartiality in her relations with other countries. By extending to Belgium the regime granted to Switzerland in 1815, the Conference confirmed her position as the "keystone of Europe" and created a fresh guarantee for the maintenance of peace.

4

The protocol added that the country would enjoy neutrality "within her limits, such as they would be fixed," reserving to the Conference the right of fixing them, and preventing the Belgians from resuming hostilities. This stipulation was all the more important because the Belgians refused to accept the frontiers which the Powers wished to impose upon them. Briefly speaking, they claimed all the territories which they occupied, including the left bank of the Scheldt, and the whole of Limburg and Luxemburg, while the Conference wished Holland to resume her previous limits with the addition of Eastern Limburg and Southern Luxemburg, which became, as a Grand Duchy, a member of the Germanic Confederation.

The protocol of January 27th, which followed, did not take into consideration the arguments put forward by the Belgian Congress. It settled the "Bases of Separation" between the two countries, reserving to Holland her limits of 1790 and leaving to Belgium "the rest" of the territory of the dual Kingdom. The reaction caused by this decision in Brussels was particularly dangerous because the Belgians were at the moment engaged in choosing a King who might

help them to defend their interests. William I having accepted the "Bases of Separation," they were left alone confronted with a hostile world, and were in dire need of a champion enjoying sufficient prestige to make his voice heard in the councils of Europe.

On the morrow of the day when the Belgian Congress had proclaimed the country's independence (November 10th), its members had decided that Belgium would become a "constitutional monarchy." This decision had been reached, in spite of the protests of a few republicans, because it was the only one which was in harmony with national traditions and likely to safeguard the country's integrity.

Since the days of Mary of Burgundy the Belgians had been devoted to their princes. Philip the Fair, Charles the Fifth, at the beginning of his reign, and later Albert and Isabella had enjoyed great popularity. The people only chafed against their Sovereigns' rule when the latter ignored their ancient liberties, oppressed their conscience or neglected their interests. Their protests were nevertheless frequently associated with the wish to see their princes reside among them, in order to be able to hear their demands and appreciate their difficulties. Absentecism, ignorance of local conditions and the hasty action of subservient Governors were among the main causes of rebellions, including those against Philip II and Joseph II. The French Republican rule, during the last years of the XVIIIth century, had struck no roots in a Catholic country, where mediæval traditions were still respected and practised.

The rising of 1830 was not directed against the monarchy, nor even against the absolute rule of a legitimate Sovereign, as in France. It was directed against the abuse of power of a foreign prince who had never been acknowledged as the national and rightful ruler. There were no doubt some republicans among the extreme Liberals, but the Catholic

party remained deeply attached to monarchic institutions. Belgian hostility towards William I was justified by his interference, as a Protestant, in the religious life of the country, and by his partiality to his Dutch subjects. The Belgian revolution of September cannot therefore be considered as the echo of the French revolution of July. In some of its features it should rather be compared to the Brabançonne revolution of 1789, which was mainly a conservative and religious movement directed against the "enlightened" rule of a Voltairian Emperor. While the latter failed, owing to the differences which soon divided the revolutionaries, the ultimate success of the 1830 rising was mainly due to the union which bound the two national parties together for over twenty years. It was more "national" than "liberal," and more "liberal" than "republican."

Even if reasons of principle had not determined the choice of the Congressmen in favour of constitutional monarchy, expediency would have compelled them to make it. In spite of their dangerous optimism, the Belgians were not entirely ignorant of the opposition provoked by their attitude. A republic could not have been acceptable to Palmerston or even to Louis-Philippe. It would never have been tolerated by the Conservative Powers. M. Nothomb warned his colleagues of this danger: "As a monarchy," he declared, "you will be a power, as a republic you will be a scare-crow (*un épouvantail*) . . . If you adopt monarchical institutions, you will put an end to the Revolution, if you proclaim the Republic, you will begin a new one."

5

A far more difficult step had still to be taken. The House of Orange being definitely excluded, to whom could the

Belgian Crown be offered? Towards the end of the year, the candidature of the Duke of Nemours, eldest son of Louis-Philippe, rallied a large number of adherents. Some delegates favoured it because of their French sympathies, but a larger number because its success would have secured the diplomatic and military support of France. They overlooked the fact that the Powers, not excepting England, would never consent to see a French prince sit on the throne of Belgium. The Balance of Power must, at all cost, be preserved. Besides, this solution would have been in contradiction with the principle of neutrality.

The situation of Louis-Philippe was most embarrassing. If he accepted, he alienated the sympathies of England; if he refused, he exposed himself to the attacks of his followers, more particularly of the annexationist Movement Party. His position was rendered still more difficult by the candidature of the Duke of Leuchtenberg, put forward by a certain number of Belgians opposed to French influence, and prompted by the Bonapartists. The Duke, owing to his connection with Napoleon's family—he was no other than Auguste de Beauharnais, son of the former Viceroy of Italy—was considered by the French King as his personal enemy.

Placed between the alternatives of provoking war or of playing into the hands of his opponents, Louis-Philippe decided to encourage the Congress to proceed with the election of his son, reserving to himself the right to refuse their kind offer, if and when the opposition of the Powers would compel him to do so. His agents assured the Belgians that England would not make their choice a *casus belli*, and that it would save them from the territorial losses resulting from the "Bases of Separation." Nemours was therefore duly elected, by a small majority, on February 3rd. The London Conference had already decided, two days pre-

viously, that no Prince belonging to the reigning families of the Five Powers was qualified to accept the Belgian Crown and the British Cabinet opposed a definite veto to the Congress's decision. Louis-Philippe submitted all the more readily because, in exchange for this concession, he had obtained the assurance that Leuchtenberg would no longer be eligible. The Belgians alone reaped no profit from this humiliating comedy.

Recognizing that some time would elapse before the election of a new candidate, the Congress tried to strengthen the Government by electing, as Regent, one of the warmest partisans of Nemours, old Baron Surlet de Chockier. This weak and inexperienced nobleman was unable to cope with the difficulties which besieged the country at the time. The failure of the Nemours election had encouraged the partisans of the Orange dynasty who were on the best terms with Lord Ponsonby, the English representative in Brussels. Meanwhile, the French had resumed in London their campaign in favour of partition, which was particularly favoured by Talleyrand: France would, of course, receive the Walloon provinces; Prussia, the districts east of the Meuse; Holland, the Flemish provinces, and England, the mouth of the Scheldt, with Antwerp, which would become "a second Gibraltar."

This scheme, and all similar proposals, were decisively turned down by Palmerston, who assured the Belgians that "he considered their country as independent and would help her to remain so." Congress began to realize that Belgium might find England a stronger and less interested ally than France, and M. Lebeau, who had become Minister for Foreign Affairs at the end of March, urged upon his colleagues the necessity of resuming negotiations with the Conference and of cultivating English friendship. Following the failure of several Orangist conspiracies, he suc-

ceeded in persuading Ponsonby that, while the people's representatives would never accept a restoration, they might be prepared to settle territorial difficulties, and that they would no longer proceed to any election to the throne without previously consulting the Powers. Ponsonby's sympathies were henceforth entirely with the Belgians and he became one of their staunchest advocates at the Foreign Office.

Lebeau was perhaps the only Belgian contemporary statesman far-sighted enough to realize the international character of the Belgian question. There were, in Congress, a number of distinguished lawyers and devoted patriots who defended their country's interests with talent and energy, but their knowledge of foreign affairs was very limited. If they looked abroad, they could not see further than Paris, where their defenders hailed them somewhat too warmly as "brothers" and "compatriots"—or London, where a "hostile" Conference assumed the right to control their destinies and to trace their frontiers. They did not discriminate between the policy pursued by Palmerston in favour of independence and non-intervention, and the general tendency of the Conservative Powers, who were only waiting for an opportunity of reaping some profit from the crisis. Few understood that England was the only Power directly interested in preserving an independent Belgium, and that she favoured neutrality as a fresh guarantee of her own security.

When he accepted the portfolio of Foreign Affairs, Lebeau had come to some definite conclusions. His country's future, according to him, depended first on finding diplomatic support, not only in France and England, but also, if possible, among the other Powers; and, secondly, on the election of a Sovereign enjoying sufficient prestige abroad to protect the country against her enemies and lay the foundations of her future life.

After enlisting the help of Ponsonby, he adopted a suggestion made, four months previously, by van de Weyer, Belgian representative in London, according to which the Crown should be offered to Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, husband of the late Princess Charlotte of England. The idea had not matured at the time because the Powers were still bent on coming to terms with the House of Orange, and on account of the opposition of Sébastiani. Now that the Orangists were discredited and Casimir-Périer had replaced Sébastiani in Paris, this project might be resumed and pursued with advantage.

Strangely enough, the opposition came from Palmerston and from Prince Leopold himself. The first feared that the Belgian offer might serve as a means of altering the Bases of Separation, the second refused to accept it as long as the Congress remained in conflict with the Conference. "I could not," he declared, "accept the sovereignty of a State whose territory is questioned by all the Powers. Without any advantage for you, I should be surrounded by enemies as soon as I set foot on Belgian soil."

The situation was becoming critical, since the Conference had sent to the Belgians an ultimatum fixing June 1st as the last date on which their submission to the Bases of Separation would be accepted. Lord Grey, who was the personal friend of Leopold, summoned Ponsonby to London, and the latter succeeded in impressing upon the Conference the dangerous excitement which prevailed in Belgium and the necessity of granting some concession. The protocol of May 21st decided that, "in order to facilitate the election of the Prince of Saxe-Coburg," the Conference would re-open negotiations with the King of Holland "to examine whether Belgium could not obtain Luxemburg for some rightful compensation." In spite of the resistance of the die-hards, Nothomb succeeded in persuading the Congress

to proceed to the election, pending further negotiations. On June 4th, Prince Leopold obtained 196 votes against 152, and a deputation was immediately sent to England, where a new surprise awaited the delegates.

Exasperated by the dilatory methods of the Congress and by the pressing demands sent from The Hague, the Conference had broken off all relations with Brussels. Ponsonby had been recalled to London and General Belliard, the French representative, to Paris. In the circumstances, Prince Leopold, who had become the Conference's official candidate for the Crown, could not receive the deputation. He was able, however, to "advise" some of its members and to put them into touch with the representatives of the Powers, who were all the more ready to listen to them since coercive measures presented serious drawbacks.

A naval demonstration on the Belgian coast could make no impression, and the British Government had no intention of sending a military expedition. The Conservative Powers were still paralysed by their internal difficulties, and no one wished to see a French army re-enter Belgian territory.

Talleyrand, on his own initiative, was once more trying to induce the Conference to adopt his "favourite plan" of partition, which was again opposed by Palmerston.

In the circumstances, Nothomb succeeded in persuading the Conference to reconsider the Bases of Separation, by suggesting a compromise embodied in the protocol of June 26th, known as the XVIII Articles: the *status quo* was maintained in Luxemburg pending negotiations between Belgium, on the one hand, and the King of Holland and the German Confederation, on the other. The settlement of the Limburg question was made the subject of further discussions between Holland and Belgium, on the principle that the former would preserve the territories which belonged

to her in 1790. The neutrality and inviolability of Belgium were confirmed, and she was no longer compelled to share the debts contracted by the United Provinces previous to the creation of the joint Kingdom of 1815. The Belgian delegates had to renounce their claim on the West bank of the Scheldt, but could henceforth hope to obtain satisfaction on the other points. By agreeing to this new arrangement, they removed all obstacles to the acceptance of the Crown by Prince Leopold, who received them officially on June 26th.

The Prince agreed to undertake the mission entrusted to him, provided the Congress ratified the deputation's decision concerning the XVIII Articles. With characteristic independence, he ignored in his speech the suggestions contained in a draft prepared by the Conference, and the wishes of Talleyrand, who desired him to make a pointed allusion to the generous part played by France in the negotiations: "Human destinies offer no nobler and more useful task," he declared, "than to be called upon to maintain a nation's independence and to consolidate its liberties. Such an important mission could alone persuade me to give up an independent position, and to leave a country to which I am bound by the most sacred ties and memories and which has given me so many tokens of kindness and sympathy. . . . I accept therefore your offer, it being understood that it will be left to the National Congress to take the measures which alone can establish the new State and ensure it the recognition of the European States."

The Belgian delegates had underestimated the "patriotic fervour" of the Congressistes. It took nine sittings to persuade them to accept the XVIII Articles. M. Lebeau exerted himself to the utmost and, in the long speech which finally brought the majority round, gave such a favourable interpretation of the new agreement that his audience

remained under the illusion that almost all the Belgian claims had been granted. Without waiting for the Dutch King's decision, Prince Leopold left England, on July 16th, to take possession of the throne of Belgium.

CHAPTER II

COBURG

I

THE election of Prince Leopold—"Coburg," as he was called by his enemies—was nothing short of providential for Belgium. No Belgian nobleman, such as the Comte de Mérode, whose name was mentioned in the early days of the negotiations, could have enjoyed sufficient authority among his political opponents, and no other foreign Prince would have proved acceptable, owing to the jealousy of the Powers. Palmerston had been careful not to encourage openly his favourite candidate. Leopold had been chosen, not by England but by Belgium and Europe. His international character was emphasized by his German origin and his forthcoming marriage with Louise-Marie d'Orléans, daughter of Louis-Philippe, which had been arranged on the eve of his departure from London. He was, besides, connected with the Tsar, in whose army he had served and whose brother, the Grand-Duke Constantine, had married his sister, Julie. The fate of Belgium, disturbed by revolutionary and Orangist agitation, depended on an early election and, had not this one taken place, it is difficult to imagine what other choice could have been made.

It also happened that Leopold was particularly well equipped to fill the part he was called upon to play.

As the eighth child of the Prince of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, he had soon been compelled by circumstances to leave his

home and to see the world. At the age of seventeen, he was already in Paris, among a crowd of German noblemen, paying homage to Napoleon, who consented to leave the small principality of Coburg undisturbed. We see him again among the Emperor's unwilling followers at the Congress of Erfurt, in 1808, and in Paris, in 1810-11, trying vainly to further his family's interests. After travelling through Switzerland, Austria, Italy and Bavaria, he returned to Coburg, waiting for an opportunity of playing a more active part in the affairs of Europe.

There can be no doubt about his ambition. Ambition was the main passion of his time and of his class. Born in 1790, he belonged to the eighteenth century and to an aristocratic Germany permeated with French manners and culture, in which national feeling was still latent. He worked for his House and for himself, not for his native country. Aware of his physical advantages—he was considered in Paris as one of the handsomest young men of his time—and eager to exercise his talents, he was determined to leave his mark on the world.

His exceptional flair warned him of the Emperor's waning power. He was the first German prince to join Russian headquarters and was rewarded with the command of a cavalry regiment. After fighting at Lützen, Bautzen and Leipzig, he entered Paris with the victorious allied armies in 1814, and shortly afterwards, followed the Tsar to London.

It is scarcely necessary to dwell again here on the courtship paid by Leopold to Princess Charlotte of England. The story has been told again and again with varying degrees of success and accuracy. It contains all the elements of a romantic plot: the wicked father—the Regent; the unhappy, kind-hearted mother—Queen Caroline; the ridiculous suitor—the Prince of Orange, or “Prince Frog,”

the handsome lover, and the beautiful Princess, wasting her life in prison—at Cranbourne Lodge or Weymouth—watched over by stern jailors. Her escape from Warwick House to Connaught Place and her secret correspondence with her lover provide further dramatic material which it would be only too easy to exploit.

This interlude in the Prince's career has, however, more than an anecdotal interest, because it explains his close relationship with the English reigning family and the change which occurred in his character when he lost his young wife, under tragic circumstances, after eighteen months of marriage.

By his brilliant union young Coburg made a good many enemies. He was represented as an "adventurer" who had come to England in search of an heiress, in order to restore his failing fortune. The Regent could not understand his daughter's infatuation and was exasperated to see his political plans—a permanent alliance between England and the new Kingdom of the Netherlands—upset by a girl's caprice. It is somewhat strange to reflect that Leopold himself, later in life, accepted without qualms a similar view, and "arranged" several diplomatic marriages for his children and relations.

The union could not, however, be considered as a misalliance, even by the Regent. Leopold belonged to one of the oldest families in Germany, was related to the Tsar, and had already distinguished himself on the battlefield. Apart from diplomatic reasons, he could stand comparison with any other suitor, not excepting the Prince of Orange.

The sincerity of his feelings after the Princess had distinguished him, and of his devotion to her after their marriage, are unquestionable. Thirty years after her death, he wrote of her as a lover. He gave her name to his

favourite daughter and "Charlotte" was the last word he uttered before his death. Being essentially a man of the world, of a world which still followed the ways and fashions of the Old Regime, the Prince had several *liaisons* before his marriage, and had several more after Charlotte's death. One of the ladies whom he favoured with his attentions, Caroline Bauer, has left two volumes of curious if unreliable *Memoirs*. All the information gathered on the Prince's intimate life shows, nevertheless, that his courtship and his honeymoon at Claremont stand apart. These were perhaps the only entirely happy years of his life and the tragedy which shattered his hopes left behind it burning regrets which no worldly success could make him forget.

It may be that these regrets were not merely founded on domestic happiness, and that the loss of the eminent position he had obtained, as future Prince Consort, added to their bitterness. To become, at the age of twenty-six, the husband of the Princess Royal, the future power beside the throne of a mighty kingdom still illumined by the glamour of Trafalgar and Waterloo, was enough to turn the wisest head. The fact remains that this short episode was the only time when the Prince's ambition was entirely in harmony with his natural inclinations, and his public work with his private life. Nothing which happened later could alter this memory.

2

After his bereavement, Leopold's first impulse was to return, for a time, to Coburg. Several circumstances prevented him from doing so.

He was too intelligent to indulge in vanity, but he knew his power and wished to exercise it. Now that he had lost



SKETCH FOR THE PORTRAIT OF LEOPOLD I
BY LIEVIN DE WINNE (1821-1880)

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Charlotte, politics became the only interest left to him. As a youth, he had known and admired Stein, Metternich and Hardenberg. He had learnt since to appreciate Castlereagh, Canning and Palmerston, and longed to emulate them. With the help of his devoted and zealous friend, Baron Stockmar, he applied himself to the study of "*die grosse Politik*" and followed closely the course of international events.

He had been made a Field-Marshal and a Privy Councillor and retained, together with Claremont House, the annual grant of £50,000, given him at the time of his marriage. In June, 1818, his favourite sister, Maria Louisa, had married the Duke of Kent. A year later, Princess Victoria was born, who was to be the heiress to the throne. After the death of the Duke of Kent, in January 1820, Uncle Leopold became the natural adviser of his sister, who was twenty years younger than himself, and the protector of her infant daughter. Having placed Claremont at their disposal, he found great comfort in their company and in the services he was able to render. He journeyed abroad, on several occasions, and revisited Coburg, but England and Claremont remained his headquarters. There alone could he enjoy an independent life, close to his dearer relations and in contact with world affairs. If, at any time, he appeared discouraged or if his interest in politics slackened, the dutiful Stockmar never failed to remind him of his duty. He owed it to his House and to himself to rise to greater things.

Leopold had struck up a friendship with Stockmar in Coburg, after the Hundred Days, during the crisis which preceded his marriage and kept him away from England. This young doctor of twenty-eight soon obtained a considerable influence on the Prince and became his constant adviser and confidant. Indeed, he had made himself so

indispensable that, when the Regent at last relented and the engagement with Princess Charlotte became official, he was immediately called to London and accompanied his master to Claremont. With true German thoroughness he applied himself to the study of Constitutional law, in order to prepare Leopold for the part he wished him to play as Prince Consort.

After the catastrophe, he pursued these studies stubbornly, convinced that another opportunity would soon occur to apply the conclusions which he had reached, concerning the best method for a constitutional Sovereign to exercise his power without hurting his subjects' susceptibilities. Although fond of abstract and high-minded principles, he was a very shrewd observer and succeeded in transferring to politics the gift for diagnosis which he had acquired as a doctor. A curious alliance was sealed between the painstaking, retiring student and the brilliant Prince and man of the world. The former agreed to remain in the wings—indeed, he preferred to do so—always discreet, shirking publicity, glad of the privilege of being allowed not to wear court dress. He worked hard, gathering information, interviewing influential people, preparing the ground for his master's next move. The latter repaid these services by fulfilling his proud servant's ambition, following his advice, consulting him on public and private matters, allowing and encouraging him to interfere in everything which even remotely concerned the House of Coburg.

"Stocky" was the intimate of Charlotte, who implored his help in her last hour, the tutor of Albert, when it was given to the nephew to fulfil his uncle's ambition and to prepare himself for the role of Prince Consort, the trusted friend of Victoria who, after his death, undertook a long journey in order to visit his grave. He was devoted heart and soul to the Coburg cause and passionately absorbed in

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politics, convinced that, since his humble birth prevented him from strutting the world's stage, the next best thing for him was to produce the play.

Leopold was not ungrateful and realized the enormous advantages he derived from this friend's constant help. He never rebuked him for volunteering to advise when his advice was not wanted, well knowing that it was always sincere and disinterested. They each had their sphere of action and, through a tacit understanding, worked into each other's hands. They only disagreed on one question. Leopold was an aristocrat and, as such, a cosmopolitan brought up in the tradition of a German Confederation presided over by Austria. Stockmar was a bourgeois and remained to the end thoroughly German, looking towards Prussia for guidance, and furthering German unity.

3

This was the era of national revolutions and constitutional monarchies. Stockmar kept his eyes open for any vacant crown, any kingdom in which his theories might be applied and the talents of his disciple exerted to their full advantage. Leopold's reputation had spread abroad and the prestige he enjoyed in London recommended him to the attention of revolutionary leaders who wished to strengthen or consolidate their country's position.

A first offer came from Greece, in 1825, but it was declined on account of the uncertain political situation of the country, struggling against Turkish rule. When he was approached, for a second time, in February 1830, three years after the battle of Navarino, the Prince, knowing that his candidature was acceptable to the Powers, and relying on Wellington's support, seized an opportunity

which he had awaited for thirteen years. He had counted without George IV and without Count Capodistria, who had ineffectually ruled over independent Greece and was loth to relinquish his post.

George IV had never forgiven his former son-in-law the rebuff he had suffered, as Regent, at the time of Charlotte's marriage. He resented his superiority and expressed the distrust he felt for his diplomatic methods by giving him the nickname of "*Marquis peu à peu*." When he heard that he had accepted the Crown of Greece, he immediately urged the candidature of Charles of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, the Duke of Cumberland's brother-in-law. Capodistria, on his side, created difficulties by claiming for Greece, Crete and the Ionian Islands, a claim which was opposed by the British Government. For two months Leopold tried to remove these obstacles, but the illness of George IV, in April, brought closer the possibility of his Regency, as uncle of Princess Victoria. Under pressure of circumstances, he finally gave up a project which must have greatly appealed to his imagination, for he referred to it on several occasions, as a great chance which had been lost to him.

The Belgian Revolution did not seem at first to afford such a favourable opportunity; the Belgians were looking towards France, and his old rival, the Prince of Orange, was the official candidate of the Powers, including England. It was only after the failure of Nemours' election and of the Orangist conspiracies that Leopold's name came to the fore.

We have seen how, taught by his Grecian experience, he took, this time, all necessary precautions before accepting the throne. He made sure of the agreement of the Conference and of the Congress to the XVIII Articles before committing himself; although he did his best to help in the negotiations, he did not do so openly, in order to

avoid any loss of prestige, in case of failure, and not to appear to be prompted merely by selfish motives. He was careful to keep in touch with all the members of the Conference as well as with the Belgian delegates and to prevent, as far as possible, jealousies and suspicions. Being a good linguist, a cosmopolitan in the best sense of the word, and having been brought into touch with all the Courts of Europe, he had no difficulty in emphasizing the international character of his candidature. This character suited the status of neutrality which was, for Europe, the necessary condition of Belgian independence. Leopold wished to appear as a Peacemaker rather than as a national leader. The Revolution was a *fait accompli*; he came to restore order, not to provoke discontent.

It was not his fault if the Tsar, who had become the Prince of Orange's brother-in-law, and Metternich, in his hatred of Liberalism, persisted in considering him as a *parvenu*, an "illegitimate" Prince who had placed himself at the head of a "band of rebels." He strove for years to dispel these prejudices and was particularly gratified when he finally succeeded in doing so. For, if his ideas moved with the times—he had sided with the Whigs in England—he was also attached to the Old Regime on the Continent and remained at heart out of sympathy with democratic principles. This curious combination of Liberal opportunism and Conservative instincts was eminently favourable to the success of the mission he had undertaken. A purely Liberal prince would never have been acknowledged by all, and would have remained a satellite of France and England. A purely Conservative prince would have been drawn towards the Germanic Confederation and could not have been able to adapt himself to the principles of the Belgian Constitution.

The fate of the country and of the dynasty depended just

as much on the attitude of the Belgians as on that of the Powers. If Leopold had acquired, at the age of forty-one, a sound knowledge of European politics, he knew very little of Belgium and Belgian affairs, having only crossed the country once in the course of his travels. He had heard, no doubt, that his future subjects had a bad reputation in Austria, where the 1789 rebellion had left some bitter memories. They were considered as restless, unreliable, and influenced by French revolutionary ideas. "I pity him," exclaimed the Emperor on hearing that Coburg had accepted the Crown, "for I know these people. No one could ever succeed in satisfying them." Francis II forgot that Leopold possessed two great qualities which had seldom been combined in the country's former governors: tact and courage. Confident in his own power of quiet persuasion, he was not in the least afraid of confronting his "troublesome subjects."

He had doubted at first whether the "republican Constitution," which he was determined to accept loyally, would give him sufficient scope. He had no wish to become a mere figure-head and to suffer from the consequences of events beyond his control, and he had frankly expressed his feelings on the subject to the Belgian delegation in London. After receiving their assurances and studying the text of the charter more closely with Stockmar, he had come to the conclusion that, as head of the Executive, he might exert a considerable influence, especially in military and foreign affairs. He knew that one of the main reasons which had induced the Belgians to adopt constitutional monarchy was their anxiety to find a strong protector who would ensure their independence and security. If the field of his activity appeared restricted on paper, it did not seem impossible to extend it gradually without hurting popular susceptibilities, provided the Belgians realized that his interference

was beneficent. The very difficulty of the task stimulated his resolution.

A last obstacle stood in the way. Coburg was a centre of Lutheranism and the Prince had no intention of altering his religion by becoming the Sovereign of a Catholic country. Aware that hostility to Protestant interference had been one of the main causes of the revolution, he made his position plain from the first. Lebeau, however, was able to dispel these scruples by sending to London, as members of the delegation, two prominent representatives of the Catholic aristocracy and clergy, Comte de Mérode and Abbé de Foere. The latter assured the Prince that members of the clergy, afraid of French annexation, had been among his most ardent supporters in the Congress, at the time of his election.

It would be an exaggeration to describe as cordial the interviews which took place in London between the Prince and the members of the delegation. Apart from a few occasions, Leopold showed in his mature years a cold and calculating temperament. Most of the sentiment which he still possessed was wrapt up with his English memories, his favourite sister, and his young admiring niece. Being deprived of enthusiasm and imagination, he could not feel attracted towards men who belonged neither to his class nor to his world. He learnt to appreciate and trust some of them, especially Lebeau, Devaux and his young secretary, van Praet. "The Prince," wrote the latter after meeting him for the first time, "is tall and lean. His face is pale. He looks cold and sad, a shade sentimental. He appears older than his age, as if suffering had left its mark upon him. . . . He will make a handsome King and his manners are perfect. He talks French slowly, with some difficulty, although correctly, with a strong German accent." The following appreciation of Charles Rogier would probably

have been endorsed by the majority of his colleagues in the National Congress: "Personally, I do not feel a great sympathy for him. You know where my tastes and affections are [Rogier had given his vote to Nemours] and it was not without regret that I was compelled to give them up. But friends whom I trust consider him to be a man of good sense, good manners, peaceful disposition, a lover of the arts, understanding the situation in which the country is placed. This should be enough for a constitutional monarchy, with republican institutions."

Both sides decided to make the best of circumstances. Later the King became devoted to his life's work, and to Belgium rather than to the Belgians. The people themselves realized more and more the value of his services to the nation and repaid him with respect and gratitude. So far, but no farther, can Leopold I be called popular. A compact had been made. So long as each party fulfilled its engagements, good understanding prevailed. On neither side can we find a desire for sacrifice or a blind devotion. The success of the association was a miracle of common sense.

4

The story of the Prince's entry into his Kingdom is significant because it illustrates the mood in which Monarch and Nation met for the first time, a mood which prevailed almost up to the end of a fruitful reign.

It had been arranged that Leopold should reach the Belgian frontier by way of Dover-Calais, in order to receive the official recognition of the two countries which stood as sponsors to the new Kingdom. Surrounded with Royal honours, he left Dover on July 16th, and was greeted at

Calais by General Belliard, the French representative in Brussels, and by the French authorities.

The next day, a Sunday, at six o'clock in the morning, he left Calais with Belliard in a carriage, accompanied by a small French escort. They soon reached Dunkirk and, a little further, the frontier village of La Panne, where a Belgian delegation had been waiting for some time on the shore. There the French escort left the Prince, who walked towards the Belgian delegates while a company of civic guards, with their top hats and blue blouses, presented arms.

By a strange coincidence, it was in this same village of La Panne that King Albert and Queen Elisabeth lived, for nearly four years, during the Great War, behind the Yser front; and the grandson, when he went back to Brussels in 1918 at the head of his troops, took the same road which had been followed, eighty-seven years before, by his grandfather on entering his kingdom. Leopold had been well advised, no doubt by Lebeau, not to go straight to his future capital, but to proceed leisurely through smaller towns and villages, in order to ingratiate himself with the population and to become accustomed to his new surroundings.

The little city of Furnes, of mediæval fame, was the first to greet the Prince. The municipality had spent 500 francs—a large sum in those days—on flags and triumphal arches. The same night, in a carriage drawn by six horses, Leopold reached Ostend, where the Burgomaster presented him with the keys of the town. The next day he left for Bruges. Everywhere, the peasants had left their work to cheer him, the bells were ringing in the villages and the *curés* shepherded the school children on both sides of the road. This welcome, given by the purely Catholic population of Flanders to a Protestant monarch, is characteristic. "I recognized," wrote Lebeau in his *Memoirs*, "this ancient

respect for the monarchic power which the Flemings were always able to associate with their attachment to their liberties, and I realized how much violence would have been done to the people's traditions and habits if . . . instead of a Prince who reminded them of their Counts of Flanders and Dukes of Brabant, we had given them a President who would not have appealed to their memories and to their imagination, and whom no one would have understood."

In Bruges, as in every town through which he passed, the King had to preside over a banquet, visit the town hall and the principal church, and deliver a number of speeches. Re-reading them to-day, one wonders how he succeeded in adapting himself so rapidly to the general trend of public opinion, and in giving satisfaction not only to Belgian but also to local aspirations. In Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp he insisted particularly on the respect which he felt for the religion of his people on the necessity for State and Church to join forces to restore order and good will. In Liège he dwelt more particularly on the encouragement to be given to a growing industry and on the opportunities of concluding favourable commercial treaties. In Brussels he made an eloquent appeal for unity and promised to devote himself to the country's interests.

The King's advisers had no doubt a hand in the preparation of some of the speeches, but these show, nevertheless, how ready he was to learn from them, to dispel prejudices, more particularly in connection with his Lutheranism, and to impress upon his subjects that he had not come only to rule over them, but to help them and to work for them. He also wished to show that he had no axe to grind, no Power to serve. "Belgian by adoption," he declared, "I shall make it a rule to be always Belgian in my policy. . . I have only accepted the Crown which you offered me because I wished to fulfil a noble and useful task, to strengthen the

institutions of a generous people and to maintain their independence. I know no other ambition than to see you happy."

These words were spoken, on July 21st, from the steps of the Church of Saint-Jacques, close to the Palace, immediately after the King's accession. This speech at least was entirely original—we have Lebeau's word for it—and it struck the right note. The Sovereign declared that he was anxious "to surround himself with the best advice," and to "gather on the spot the information necessary to enlighten his views on the country's government."

The ceremony is worth recording because it quaintly combined mediæval traditions with the modern protocol. Starting from Laeken, where he had spent the previous day in the old country house of the Archdukes, Leopold rode at the head of a procession formed by civic guards, soldiers of the regular army and a number of men wounded during the revolution, one of them carried on a stretcher decorated with laurels. At the gate of Brussels, the Burgomaster, M. Rouppe, well known for his advanced views, presented him with the keys of the town, inviting him to "maintain the people's charter and immunities," and promising him that the people, in their turn, would "defend his throne and preserve his Royal prerogatives."

The Place Royale, which was only reached after noon, had been transformed into a kind of open-air Congress-room. In the middle stood a large "tree of liberty"; it was surrounded by tribunes decorated with flags and trophies. The throne was placed under a canopy in front of the Church of Saint-Jacques. Received by the Regent, the Prince was first led to a seat among the audience. It was only after Baron Surlet de Chockier had formally resigned the powers invested in him by the National Assembly, and after Leopold had taken the solemn oath to respect the

Constitution, that Royal honours were paid to him. While a salute of guns was fired, he was invited by the President of the Congress to ascend the steps: "*Sire, montez au trône!*"

Thus was the tradition, observed centuries before by the Kings of Spain and the Emperors of Austria, linked up with the recent revolution.

The King had every reason to congratulate himself on the results achieved. Everywhere he had been received with cordiality, even enthusiasm. He realized that this enthusiasm was not roused entirely by his handsome presence and tactful words, and that its chief reason was the feeling of relief which the country experienced after passing through a period of dangerous unrest. But the very fact that this relief was felt was reassuring and showed that his accession had provoked already a patriotic reaction, bringing together the most healthy elements in the nation. He had been advised not to pass through Ghent, the supposed centre of Orangism, where the linen industry had been paralysed since the revolution. Had not the mill-workers exhibited, a few days before, a mannequin dressed up in English uniform, riding on a donkey, and followed it through the streets shouting "Down with Coburg"? He had shown them, by passing through their ancient town, that Coburg did not shirk his duty, and he had been rewarded with a warm welcome. Without a smile, he had listened to a florid speech of welcome delivered by a representative of the old corporations, in which the "tree of liberty" was described as "taking root under the shelter of his hand" and the republican hat was "decorated with the gems of his crown."

What could he not do in this new country, among these somewhat naïve and open-hearted people? They had worked for a "republican monarchy," but their deeper in-

stinct was with the monarchy rather than with the republic. He had been right in thinking that the Constitution, in spite of its forbidding restrictions, would leave him ample scope. Here was work to do, here were risks to take, results to achieve.

CHAPTER III

THE TEN DAYS AND AFTER

I

WHILE pursuing his triumphal tour of the country, the King did not suspect the immediate danger which threatened him.

He knew that, on hearing of his election, William I had remarked that "he would consider as an enemy any person who would accept the throne of Belgium," and he was no doubt aware that the Dutch had massed their forces in North Brabant, on the pretext of protecting their frontier against possible aggression. But he had no knowledge of the importance of these forces and of his adversary's determination to use them, on the morrow of his accession, according to a well-prepared plan.

Had he been better informed, he would have applied himself at once to strengthening the defence of his new kingdom, which had been sorely neglected under the Regency. While during the last months the Dutch had re-equipped and reinforced their army, commanded by a competent Staff under the Prince of Orange, the Belgian revolutionary troops had become disorganized. A large number of volunteers had gone back to their homes, and the regular soldiers' morale had been spoilt by the weakness and favouritism shown by the Regent's Government. Some of the superior officers were suspected, not without reason, of being in the pay of the Dutch. Thanks to the unrest prevailing in the country, Orangist agents had been

able to gather information and to procure intelligence from the highest quarters.

The Belgian "armies," as they were proudly called, were scattered all over the country, without any regard for the threatening attitude of the Dutch. One was in Flanders, another in Luxemburg—together about 4,000 men; the main body, amounting at most to 20,000, was divided between "the army of the Scheldt" under General Tieken, based upon Antwerp—where the Dutch still held the citadel—and "the army of the Meuse" under General Daine, based upon Liège. They were separated by a distance of seventy miles, so that the road to Brussels stood wide open to the Dutch.

No one suspected that William I intended to break the armistice imposed by the Powers and was preparing a surprise attack. He had rejected the XVIII Articles and expressed strongly his resentment of the changes made in the Bases of Separation, but the Conference had grown accustomed to his outspoken protests. In London the Belgians were far more suspected of wishing to resume hostilities than the Dutch, and the latter seemed justified in taking "defensive measures" on their southern frontier.

In fact, King William had never given up the hope of recovering his lost provinces. He believed that the unrest and dissensions which stirred the country would deliver her sooner or later into his hands. The accession of Leopold, as the Powers' official candidate, and the patriotic reaction it provoked in Belgium, caused him a far greater disappointment than the XVIII Articles. According to a Russian diplomat who was in close touch with him, he considered the accession of Leopold as "the worst possible combination for his own interest, because this Prince, being protected by England, would have some chance of maintaining the political existence of Belgium, even if the circumstances

which led to the formation of the State were to disappear.”* For the time he doubted his calculations. Seizing this last opportunity, he broke the armistice without warning on August 2nd.

The news reached Leopold in Liège, amidst the festivities of his “Joyous Entry.” He was all the more surprised because he had been specially careful in his conduct of Belgian affairs. Having secured the support of the Powers and settled with them territorial differences, he thought himself free to devote his attention to the difficult task of obtaining the confidence of his new subjects. None of his advisers, not even the cautious Stockmar, had had any suspicion of this new danger. He was suddenly faced with an attack for which he was entirely unprepared. He did not even know the exact strength and disposition of his forces and could extract scant information from his incompetent War Minister, General de Failly. His position was particularly cruel because the Constitution gave him the supreme command of the Belgian army and the responsibility for the country’s defence. He felt that his military experiences, during the Napoleonic Wars, had not given him sufficient training for the part he was compelled to play. By temperament, he was a diplomat rather than a soldier, but he lacked neither courage nor resolution, and preserved his *sang-froid* when almost everyone in his entourage had lost theirs.

Finding himself isolated and in dire need of advice, he appealed to the most intelligent and determined Belgian statesman he had met during the last month, Joseph Lebeau.

After accompanying his Sovereign to Brussels and settling, as he hoped, his country’s affairs, Lebeau had asked to be relieved of his ministerial post, and had resumed his modest functions as a magistrate at the Court of Appeal. He rushed

* Orloff to Nesselrode, March 14th, 1832.

to Liège in answer to the King's invitation, and was asked whether he thought that the Belgian army could resist the aggression. In the festive and optimistic atmosphere which surrounded him, Lebeau had the courage to face realities, to give his candid opinion on the situation and to urge the King to send messengers immediately to the British and French Governments, asking for the military support implied by the status of guaranteed neutrality. This was a bold move, because the Belgians were bound to resent foreign interference, and because the measure was not strictly constitutional. No Government was allowed to admit foreign troops on Belgian soil unless authorized to do so by Parliament. Leopold agreed that no time should be lost, but asked Lebeau to resume his portfolio and to assume the responsibility of this action before his colleagues.

After taking this decisive step, they left the same evening for Brussels.

2

Had all defensive measures been left in the King's hands and his orders been obeyed, the country might have been spared the bitter humiliation which awaited her. General Gérard, who was immediately sent to Belgium by Louis-Philippe, would not have been delayed before entering Hainault, and the two main Belgian forces, based on Liège and Antwerp, might have been able to effect their junction in Brabant, thus covering Brussels. Although meeting with little resistance, the Dutch only moved slowly towards their goal, and it is unlikely that any serious engagement would have taken place before the arrival of the French army, against which they had been instructed not to open hostilities.

Unfortunately, neither the King nor Lebeau was able to override the lack of discipline of the army commanders and the timidity of the politicians. The order given by the former, as early as August 3rd, to General Daine to leave the Meuse and move towards Antwerp was never followed, and the Belgian ministers pressed the Sovereign to alter the form of his appeal to France, and to stipulate that the French troops should wait further instructions before crossing the frontier. Let Belgium perish provided Article 121 of the Constitution be saved!

A false optimism and a tendency to postpone disagreeable decisions prevailed everywhere. In the circumstances, the campaign could only be a military walk-over for the Prince of Orange. Daine's troops were routed at Hasselt on the 8th, and Ticken was compelled to retire on Louvain. It was only the rapid advance of the French, who had at last been allowed to enter Belgium on August 9th, which prevented the enemy from reaching the capital. Hostilities stopped on the 12th, and the Dutch retired by slow stages towards their own frontier.

Through this short and disastrous campaign the courage and activity of the King contrasted strongly with the attitude of his generals. On August 4th he had left for Antwerp to reassure the population exposed to a bombardment from the citadel. From Malines, where he established his headquarters, he had tried vainly to keep in touch with Daine, whose movements remained uncertain. Two days later he had rushed to Lierre, to confer with Ticken, and to Aerschot, where he expected to take over the command of all his forces. Finding that his troops had not reached the town, he had gone to Louvain to prepare the resistance of the civic guards. On the 8th he was back at Aerschot, where he was at last able to snatch a few hours' sleep, confident that Daine would join him the next day. After hear-

ing of the Hasselt rout, he had, in a last attempt to delay the enemy, launched an attack before Louvain, exposing himself as a subaltern in order to raise the courage of his demoralized troops, and narrowly escaping capture by the Dutch cavalry.

Leopold preserved to the last days of his reign a bitter memory of the "Ten Days' Campaign." He felt that he had missed a great opportunity. "Had I been able to devote a few months to preparations," he told Lebeau before the beginning of hostilities, "I should not fear a struggle." He thought that a success might increase the patriotism of the people and their confidence in the "chief who fought at their head." He now had everything to fear from a defeat for which he was in no way responsible. In their disappointment the Belgians might turn against him and, according to the old principle of *væ victis*, the Powers might also alter their attitude. Not only his fate but that of Belgium stood in the balance.

Some of these forebodings were, fortunately, unfounded. The people were moved by the courage and determination with which, on the morrow of his accession, their new Sovereign had defended their cause at the risk of his life. They believed, with General Belliard, that "but for him the army would have been annihilated and the power of the Nassau restored in Belgium." He had proved himself a leader worthy of their confidence. The Belgian ministers, on the other hand, realized the wisdom of the decision the King had taken when, following Lebeau's advice, he had appealed to the Powers as soon as the armistice had been broken. If he had not saved the country, he had at least succeeded in preventing a complete disaster.

Public anger turned against the generals who had shown their incompetence and who were suspected of treason. One of the first initiatives taken by the new Parliament,

elected in November, was to order an enquiry, which, however, was never pursued to the end. Some documents from the Dutch archives which have since been published show that, at least with regard to Daine, these suspicions were not unfounded.

The King, however, refused obstinately to be drawn on the subject. The generals of the Ten Days, although removed from their command, were still received at Court. Many years later, he gave his interpretation of the events to his favourite daughter, Princess Charlotte. Among her notes is an account of a conversation which she had, in September 1863, with her *cher Papa*. "Have you read," he asked her, "Colonel Huybrechts' book, *La Campagne de Belgique*? It gives the unadulterated truth. One part of the army betrayed me, the other ran away." The author of this book denounced not only Daine but also some officers belonging to headquarters. The King thought, no doubt, that if all those who had a share of responsibility in this miserable affair were to be prosecuted, public opinion would never be satisfied. He did not believe in sacrificing a scapegoat to the people's anger and preferred to wipe the slate clean and begin afresh.

Leopold had underrated Belgian patriotism, which had been subjected to a severe test by recent events. Before his arrival in the country, both Orangists and the pro-French party had been particularly active. The Dutch believed that a large number of Belgians would rally to them, after their first military successes. A section of French opinion was equally convinced that the arrival of Gérard and his troops would be greeted with wild demonstrations. Both were equally disappointed. While resenting the invasion, the Belgians witnessed the progress of their deliverers without any enthusiasm. They did not wish to owe their freedom to foreign rather than to Belgian arms.

3

With regard to the Powers' reaction to his defeat, Leopold's apprehensions were fully realized.

The favourable solution given to the territorial problem in the XVIII Articles had only been reached owing to the close entente of England and France, and to the fact that the Conservative Powers were still embarrassed by internal difficulties. But in August the Austrians had crushed the insurrection in Parma, Modena and Bologna, and a powerful Russian army was marching on Warsaw, where "order was restored" a few weeks later. The same circumstances which had served Belgium a year before were now endangering her position. Prussia, Austria and Russia refused to receive Belgian representatives, and the Tsar was particularly anxious that King William should reap full benefit from his military success. The fact that this success had been won after violating an armistice imposed by the Conference was not even taken into account.

The Ten Days had far graver consequences with regard to the Liberal Powers, on whose joint support the fate of the country ultimately depended.

Leopold's appeal had been answered half-heartedly by the British Government, who had contented themselves with placing an embargo on Dutch ships without blockading the Dutch coast. On the other hand, it had brought a French army 50,000 strong into Belgian territory. This revived in London the old suspicion against French territorial ambitions. France was even suspected of having encouraged the Dutch King's aggression in order to find an opportunity for military interference. Palmerston insisted on immediate withdrawal, in spite of the fact that the Dutch forces were still threatening the frontier and that the

Conference only declared a suspension of hostilities on August 23rd. It was for him "a question of peace or war." In vain did Leopold, in a series of interviews, beg Sir Robert Adair, the new British representative in Brussels, to be allowed to retain for a short time the support of one French division and one French cavalry brigade.

English suspicions were further aroused by the attitude of Talleyrand, who had seized this opportunity of furthering his "pet scheme": partition. Not content with pressing his project on Madame Adélaïde, Louis-Philippe's confidential adviser, he tried to enlist the support of the Prussian delegate in London. Without accepting Talleyrand's tempting suggestions, the French King wished, nevertheless, to gather some advantages from his intervention. Before withdrawing his troops, under British pressure, he obtained from Leopold the promise to dismantle five fortresses of the Barrier. Palmerston considered that neither Leopold nor Louis-Philippe had any voice in the matter, and that the Powers alone were entitled to deal with an arrangement made in 1815 against France. This led to a heated debate which was particularly painful to the King of the Belgians, since he found himself faced with the alternative of either breaking his promise to Louis or alienating England, and denied the right to negotiate with a neighbour on a question which seemed to him of small importance. Since the four Powers threatened to refuse to ratify the new treaty settling the international position of Belgium, if he refused his consent, he finally was compelled to approve a convention maintaining some of the fortresses he had undertaken to dismantle.

This action was deeply resented in France. Leopold was accused of duplicity and subjected to such bitter attacks that he seriously contemplated abdication. "There are limits to a man's patience and endurance," he wrote to his friend Lord Durham in January 1832, "and I am getting

nearer to them every day." The French Government obtained at last from the Powers the addition of a note to the Convention, declaring that the latter was in no way contradictory to the King's "full sovereignty over the fortresses," and to "the independence and neutrality of Belgium, guaranteed by the Powers."

The authors of this "milk-and-water" document, to use Leopold's own expression, endeavoured to reconcile the irreconcilable, since the secret clause which obliged the King eventually to arrange with the Powers the defence of the fortresses was incompatible with the impartial attitude which he should have observed as a neutral. The whole discussion was of small consequence, since the fortifications soon became obsolete, and were, in fact, dismantled by the Belgians, at a later stage, without any objection being raised abroad. But the heat displayed on both sides showed how the prestige of the country had suffered through her defeat, and the small faith which the Powers had in the stability of the new kingdom.

4

A far graver subject had been absorbing the King's attention during September and October 1831.

After the Ten Days, he had suspected that the Conference would alter the XVIII Articles in order to render them more acceptable to the Dutch. The news sent by van de Weyer, the Belgian representative, was so alarming that Stockmar was dispatched to London to obtain further information. The latter confirmed his master's worst apprehensions. The general feeling was that, since Belgium had not been able to defend herself, Holland should be placed in a position to check French ambition. Louis-Philippe, it is true, remained faithful to the engagement taken by the

Conference towards Leopold, but the French King was no longer trusted, owing to his delay in withdrawing his troops from Belgium and to the intrigues of Talleyrand, who pursued his own project of breaking up the country's unity while pretending to defend her interests.

The Conference agreed on one point: a final settlement should be prepared and presented to Belgium and Holland. If either country should refuse to accept it, she should be left to suffer the consequences. On September 3rd the Belgian and Dutch plenipotentiaries were invited to present their views. On the 26th the Conference proceeded to draft the new settlement, without consulting them, and on October 14th the Treaty of XXIV Articles was published. Belgium lost all she had obtained or hoped to obtain before Leopold's accession. Half of Luxemburg formed a Grand Duchy under the sovereignty of King William, within the German Confederation. Holland gained half of Limburg, with Maestricht and both banks of the Scheldt. Belgium was, besides, obliged to pay an annuity of 8,400,000 florins.

According to Lebeau's words, "the XVIII Articles had been lost on the battlefield of Louvain." The new treaty was bad for Belgium, but it might have been worse. Thanks to Palmerston, the navigation of the Scheldt remained free and guarantees were given to the new kingdom concerning its maintenance and Antwerp's communications with the Rhine. If the country's political and strategical interests were sacrificed, her commercial interests at least were safeguarded.

Leopold had been given, this time, the opportunity of displaying his talent as a diplomat. He had personally directed the negotiations from Brussels and sent instructions to van de Weyer, in London, and to Lehon, his representative in Paris. As usual, Stockmar had proved invaluable. It was not without reluctance that the King persuaded his

Government to accept the sacrifices imposed upon them, but he was convinced that no further opposition to the Conference could bring any result and that, considering the situation in Europe, further delays might be dangerous. On November 2nd the Belgian Parliament accepted the XXIV Articles. The treaty was ratified by England and France in January 1832, and by the Conservative Powers three months later. The latter, however, made certain reservations which caused strong protests in Brussels and nearly provoked a ministerial crisis. King William had not accepted the XXIV Articles; neither had the Dutch left the citadel of Antwerp and the forts which they occupied on the lower Scheldt. In the circumstances, the Belgian Government, anxious to satisfy public opinion, refused to reopen negotiations with Holland.

Leopold realized that, though King William could afford to "sit tight," he himself was not in a position to do so. He had nothing to gain and everything to lose through further delays. When he heard that Palmerston had suggested to his delegates in London that they should offer to enter into negotiations on the basis of the treaty, he took matters into his own hands, accepted the resignation of his Cabinet and formed a new Government with General Goblet, Lebeau and Rogier.

Goblet was a warm supporter of Palmerston's proposal, known as "*le thème de Lord Palmerston*." He hoped that King William's well-known obstinacy would enable him to turn the tables against him. Events confirmed this expectation. On October 1st, the Dutch having rejected the Belgian offer, the Belgian Government requested the help of the Powers in order to obtain the execution of the XXIV Articles. On the 22nd England and France sent an ultimatum to both Kings, threatening sanctions unless they received satisfactory replies. Leopold agreed to evacuate

Limburg and Luxemburg, William refused to evacuate Antwerp. The blockade of the Dutch coast by Anglo-French naval forces began on November 5th and, ten days later, General Gérard once more crossed the frontier on his way to Antwerp.

Leopold would no doubt have preferred to conduct military operations himself. He was now in a position to wipe out the memory of the Ten Days. With the help of his war minister de Brouckère, he had entirely reorganized his forces, which amounted to 70,000 men. In spite of foreign criticism, he had engaged a number of experienced French and Polish officers and could rely on the services of a competent Staff. He had, however, to bear the brunt of the people's disappointment caused by their soldiers' inaction.

Wishing to emphasize the international character of the operations, the Powers had decided that the Belgians could only enter into action if the Dutch attacked them. On his side, William I had instructed his troops not to cross the frontier, in order to avoid any conflict with the French. The siege of Antwerp, in 1832, should be studied as a historical curiosity. It is a rare example of civilized modern warfare. There were two expectant and immovable armies, one on each side of the theatre of operations. The besiegers of the citadel agreed not to occupy the town and its defenders not to bombard it, all the fighting being carried on from outside. After a vigorous resistance which lasted over a month, Chassé was allowed to leave Antwerp "with the honours of war" and, a few days later, the French evacuated Belgium.

5

Everybody seemed satisfied. The Powers had asserted their authority, the Belgian flag was hoisted on the old

fortress of Antwerp and the Dutch King had at least saved his face. Discontent prevailed, nevertheless, in the Belgian Chamber. The House was divided not so much between Catholics and Liberals as between moderates and extremists, partisans of peace and negotiation with the Conference, and partisans of war with Holland with or without the consent of Europe. The latter were particularly incensed at the inaction of the Belgian army before Antwerp. During the siege, they had succeeded in provoking a ministerial crisis which Leopold had ended by offering, once more, the Premiership to the leader of the Opposition, who was unable to accept it. After the fall of the citadel, these attacks were renewed on the ground that this second intervention of the Powers had not solved the problem of Belgo-Dutch relations and that the "anti-national policy" of the Government encouraged King William's resistance.

Owing to the difficulties caused by the bad season, and not wishing to arouse, this time, British susceptibilities, Louis-Philippe had recalled his troops immediately after Chassé's capitulation, leaving the outside forts of Liefkenshoek and Lillo in the hands of the Dutch. The latter, by way of reprisal, had closed the Scheldt to foreign vessels. The extremists in the Chamber contended that Belgium had nothing to expect from the Conference and should immediately carry the fight into the enemy's camp. They refused to vote the War budget, and the King, using for the first time his dangerous prerogative, decided to dissolve Parliament and to proceed to new elections.

Leopold realized that the blockade of the Dutch coast would in the end bring his adversary to reason and that one of the causes which retarded a settlement was the bad effect produced in Conference circles by some irresponsible speeches made in the Belgian Chamber. His bold action bore fruit. On May 21st the Dutch King consented to a

Provisory Convention according to which the suspension of arms should be prolonged indefinitely, and the territorial *status quo* maintained as long as the XXIV Articles were not ratified by all parties. The allied blockade was lifted and the Scheldt freed from Dutch control. The Belgians were also released, for the time being, from any financial liability with regard to the debt. They reaped the full benefit of their prompt acceptance of the XXIV Articles and of Palmerston's "theme."

This provisory settlement had a beneficial influence on Belgian politics. The die-hards pursued their attacks for a time, but felt more and more out of touch with public opinion. In their efforts to recover part of their influence, they overreached themselves in proposing to impeach Lebeau, as the responsible author of the country's misfortune. Feeling relatively secure under the new diplomatic arrangement and under the leadership of the King, the people wished to devote their energy to practical objects and had no time to waste on vain recriminations. They accepted the Convention as definitive and did not believe that, even if King William wished to reopen the discussion, the Powers would allow him to do so.

For them, the Ten Days and their lamentable consequences were over. They little suspected that, by consenting to accept the XXIV Articles in 1838, King William would be able to recover the ground he had lost through his former resistance.

6

Why did the King of Holland suddenly decide to sign a treaty which he had so stubbornly rejected seven years before?

The obvious answer is that the XXIV Articles were far

more favourable to him than the Convention of 1833. Under the latter, Belgium only lost two small forts which could not even be used to close the Scheldt to trade, while Holland lost two provinces, beside the annuity on account of the debt.

This sacrifice, however, was more apparent than real. William I preferred a bad provisory solution than a more advantageous permanent one, because he still hoped to recover his lost provinces. Confronted by the Powers' resistance, he decided to bide his time.* He had a poor opinion of his former subjects' capacity to govern themselves, and was convinced that they would never succeed in balancing their budget. During the fifteen years which preceded the revolution, he had developed the country's resources, improved trade and encouraged industry. He knew better than anyone how the Belgian economic system was dependent on Dutch ports and Dutch markets. Separation had been ruinous to a number of industrialists, among whom he counted his most faithful supporters. Workmen, he thought, were bound to follow suit. Misery would breed discontent, and discontent civil strife, which could not be restrained under a "republican Constitution."

King William counted upon Orangism, which he subsidized lavishly, upon the proverbial restlessness of the Belgian people, upon the incompetence of ministers and politicians and upon the possibilities of European conflict, which did not seem remote at the time. He knew that the Anglo-French entente which had defeated him rested on frail foundations, and that if it collapsed he could rely on the support of the Conservative Powers. Had not the latter bound themselves, in March 1833, to "act in common agreement in the Belgian question"?

* See Orloff's letter to Nesselrode, March 14th, 1832, in Colenbrander : *Gedenkstukken der algemeene Geschiedenis van Nederland*.

He had not counted on the political genius of Leopold, who succeeded in strengthening gradually the Executive power without violating the Constitution or hurting his people's susceptibilities, or on the ability and foresight of some of his ministers, particularly Rogier, who, in 1834, restored the country's prosperity by building a system of State railways—the first in Europe. Neither had he expected that Orangism would soon become the monopoly of a dwindling number of aristocrats, out of touch with the bourgeoisie and held in obloquy by the people.

Year after year, he saw his chances of success disappear. His attitude was, besides, causing serious trouble in Holland, where the taxes required on account of military expenses had made him unpopular. Threatened with a refusal by the States-General to vote the budget, he decided at last to sign, on March 11th, 1838, the XXIV Articles.

7

If this step implied a serious sacrifice on his part, it implied a much heavier sacrifice on the part of Belgium and her Sovereign.

The desperate protests of the Belgians when faced with the obligation of executing the treaty can only be understood if we remember the circumstances which led to the crisis.

The XXIV Articles had been ratified by Parliament under duress, immediately after a disastrous military campaign which jeopardized the country's existence. Since then Belgium had scored a diplomatic success by obtaining, through the Powers' action, the evacuation of Antwerp and the signature of a convention which left them in possession of Limburg and Luxemburg. The people of these two Catholic provinces, who had joined in the revolution, had

shared the country's life, sent their deputies to Parliament, and taken part, through distinguished ministers, in the government. It was unthinkable that hundreds of thousands of Catholics should pass now under the rule of a "Protestant despot," and that no account should be taken of their wishes. It seemed unjust that the Belgians should be threatened with coercive measures when they did not comply with the Powers' wishes, and that the Dutch King should not be penalized for flouting them for so long. Never did the principle: "*Dura Lex sed Lex*" seem more difficult to accept.

Leopold's position was particularly painful. He always considered the XXIV Articles as a breach of the promise given him by the Conference before he accepted the throne. From the first, he had foreseen that he would be placed in a false position if an agreement on the territorial question was not reached. He had no wish to be considered as the representative of Europe sent to rule over Belgium in order to persuade an unwilling people to accept the Powers' decrees. Besides, in taking the oath and in all his public declarations, he had insisted on the purely Belgian character of the monarchy and on his devotion to the country's interest. For the second time he was faced with the cruel alternative of acting against his better judgment by resisting the Powers, or of damping the patriotic enthusiasm of his people by advising them to submit. During the crisis which followed and which lasted over a year, he expressed on several occasions his willingness, and even his inclination, to resign the Crown.

If he did not do so, it was owing partly to his personal character, which prevented him from relinquishing any task, however ungrateful, once he had undertaken it, and partly to the loyalty of the nation, which looked upon him as upon its wisest adviser and most trustworthy defender. His position in the State was very different from what it had been in 1831. The firmness he had shown, on several

occasions, had inspired respect and, especially in foreign affairs, he enjoyed a prestige which allowed him a far greater freedom of action.

From the first he must have realized that he could not alter the Conference's decision, which exacted complete ratification of the treaty as it stood. He was nevertheless determined not to leave a stone unturned and to exert all his powers of persuasion in London and Paris before advising his ministers to submit. Not satisfied with the unfavourable reports he received from van de Weyer and Lehon, he used his personal influence with Louis-Philippe, who had become his father-in-law, and with his niece Victoria. The first declared that he could not take any initiative without arousing British suspicion; the second wrote to him, on June 10th, advising him to use his influence "to mitigate discontent and calm irritation and procure acquiescence in whatever arrangements may ultimately be found inevitable," and assuring him of her deep sympathy in the "very difficult and trying" situation in which he was placed.

A few weeks later, Leopold went to Paris, where he persuaded himself that the only people from whom he might expect some support were tainted with territorial ambitions. In September a visit to Windsor brought no appreciable result. Two months later, he sent van Praet to London with a letter to Palmerston, the only British minister who showed some practical sympathy for his position. "It would not be difficult for the Powers to destroy Belgium," he wrote, "but let me ask you what could be done afterwards and what would be thought of a British Cabinet who allowed such a fate to be inflicted upon a prosperous and innocent people? I have a right to ask these questions because I am essentially bound to England—which is the reason why Belgium fixed her choice upon me. It is evident that had I not believed that the existence of an independent Belgium was truly in the

interest of Great Britain, I could not have accepted the responsibility of governing her.”

Leopold had few illusions left, but he hated to hurt his people's patriotism. He tried to bring them down gradually to the realization that submission was the only possible course to follow. In his speech from the throne, on November 13th, he declared once more that “the rights and interests of the country” alone inspired his policy and that “they would be defended with courage and perseverance.” These words were not his minister's but his own. They obviously only meant that fresh efforts would be made to obtain an acceptable solution—nothing more; but the state of public feeling was such that they were interpreted almost as a declaration of war and greeted with the wildest enthusiasm.

The only result of Leopold's efforts had been the reduction of the annuity from eight to five million florins. Aware of Holland's financial embarrassments, he made a last attempt in London and Paris to obtain some territorial concession by offering monetary compensation (a hundred million francs)—but to no avail.

All through these months the attitude of the Conservative Powers had been deliberately hostile. The military preparations made in Belgium were watched with suspicion. The engagement of the Polish general Skzynecki was looked upon as an infringement of neutrality. Prussia and Austria seized this opportunity of withdrawing their ministers from Brussels.

A last peremptory note from the Conference left no doubt that, in case of further delay, France and England would leave a free hand to King William's supporters. On February 19th the Cabinet, reduced by several resignations, asked the Chamber to authorize the King to sign the treaty. The debate lasted for fifteen sittings, during which a flood of romantic invective was poured by the Opposition upon the

unfortunate ministers. In vain did they try to persuade their colleagues that resistance could only lead to disaster. "The nation," exclaimed Devaux, "needs at least ten years of calm, regular and settled life, to strike roots in Europe and become capable of awaiting the storm with some confidence. This should be our aim. If we succeed, we shall dispel many unfair prejudices in the North, and weaken some ambitious claims in the South."—"No, 380,000 times no!" countered Gendebien, "in the name of the 380,000 Belgians whom you sacrifice to fear!" One deputy was so shaken by emotion that he collapsed on his bench in a dead faint. The motion was finally adopted by 58 votes to 42.

Such was the cruel epilogue of the Ten Days. It had a depressing influence on public opinion. "Physicians will tell you," wrote Leopold to Queen Victoria, on April 19th, "that often an operation, which might have been performed at one time, could not, without great danger to the patient, be undertaken some years later . . . This country now feels humbled and *désenchanté* with its *soi-disant* independence, as it pleased the Conference to settle it." And he added, not without bitterness: "I think old Pirson was not far wrong when he said in the Chamber that if the treaty was carried into execution I was likely to be the first and last King of the country. Whenever it happens, it will be very awkward for England, and deservedly so."

The King's forebodings were not confirmed. His prestige remained unshaken. His dynasty was recognized by all Europe and the political status of Belgium established. The foundations were laid.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRADE OF KING

I

DURING the thirteen years which followed the death of Princess Charlotte, Leopold and Stockmar evolved a theory of government which, at the time, was nothing short of an original discovery, and which circumstances allowed them later to apply in England and in Belgium.

During the eighteenth century, the main tendency of Constitutionalism had been directed against the monarchy, and aimed either at suppressing it altogether, as in France, or at encroaching upon its attributes to such an extent that the Sovereign was no longer in contact with his people. In England, which was held up as a model, the Hanoverian Kings, except George III, had left so much power in the hands of their Prime Ministers that they had become mere figure-heads and could no longer exert considerable influence on British policy. In answer to an inquiry made by Queen Victoria in 1841, Lord Melbourne wrote to her, on November 1st: "How the power of Prime Ministry grew up into its present form, it is difficult to trace precisely, as well as how it became attached to the office of First Commissioner of the Treasury. Sir Robert Walpole was the first man in whose person this union of power was decidedly established, and its being so arose from the very great confidence which both George I and George II reposed in him, and from the difficulty which they had in transacting business, from their

imperfect knowledge of the language of the country.”*

Stockmar's conception of monarchy, explained at great length in his *Memoirs*, was that it should play an important part in the modern State and was not inconsistent with the Parliamentary System. He had no leaning towards the restoration of absolutism, but believed that a good government should be founded on a true balance between the Executive and the Legislative, and that the Executive should be exerted jointly by the Sovereign and his ministers in council. His policy was based on a frank and loyal acknowledgement of constitutional methods, combined with the full exercise of the advisory powers left to the Crown and of its prerogatives.

As Stockmar's faithful disciple, Leopold tried to prepare Princess Victoria for the part he wished her to play in restoring the influence of the Crown. After 1831, he combined his advice to her with his own practice in ruling over the new kingdom entrusted to his care. His correspondence with his niece has often been quoted for its personal and anecdotal interest. It has seldom been given the attention it deserves as an exposition of the art of government. Together with Stockmar's *Memoirs*, it explains how monarchical and democratic institutions, which seemed irreconcilable according to eighteenth-century revolutionary ideas, became later reconciled in certain European States. Recent events seem to show that kingship has proved a better safeguard against dictatorship than the republican system. The conception of absolutism is no longer associated with the Crown. The situation is almost entirely reversed. Kingship has become to-day one of the strongest guarantees of individual and popular liberty.

The problem with which Leopold and Stockmar were faced, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was how to

* *The Letters of Queen Victoria.*

adapt the monarchy to popular representation. They wished to show that the conflict in which Nation and Crown appeared engaged was more apparent than real and that, in practice, the moderating influence of a constitutional monarch was a necessary corrective to party strife and a safeguard against individual ambition. Better than any temporary President, he was able to maintain a certain continuity in the country's policy, and to place himself beyond and above the conflicts of creed or interest which divided his subjects.

In England, where the Constitution rested on tradition and precedent and where the powers of the Crown were not strictly defined, the methods to be adopted to achieve this end would necessarily be different from those which might suit Belgium, where the King was bound by the text of the national charter. In the first case, it would be necessary to insist on retaining the Royal prerogatives which had not yet been encroached upon, and to develop the moral prestige and popularity of the Sovereign; in the second, his constitutional powers should be interpreted in the widest sense and fresh outlets found for his activity. Success would justify these efforts and silence criticisms.

2

The correspondence between the "dearest Uncle" and his "dearest Love" begins in 1828, when the Princess was only nine years of age, with the exchange of birthday and other affectionate greetings of an intimate character. A few years later, however, the voice of the tutor makes itself heard. A Royal Heiress must be educated in order to be prepared for the part she is to play, and both Leopold and Stockmar had an almost exaggerated belief in education. According

to them, the faults committed by George IV and William IV should have been attributed to the fact that "the persons charged with their education were incapable of inculcating principles of truth and morality in their youth."* This fatal mistake must not be repeated.

In a series of letters addressed in 1834 from Lacken to the Princess, her uncle gives her some sound advice about reading: "Our times resemble most those of the Protestant reformation; then people were moved by religious opinions as they now undoubtedly are by political passions. Acquaint yourself therefore with the writings of that period. What I particularly recommend to you is to study in the Memoirs of the great and good Sully the last years of the reign of Henry IV of France, and the events which followed his assassination." Later Leopold sends his niece a French memoir on Queen Anne to show her "what a Queen ought not to be." In answer to her eager enquiries, he promises to explain to her "what a Queen ought to be."

On the occasion of her confirmation, he warns her against hypocrisy, "a besetting sin at all times, but particularly of the present, and many are the wolves in sheep's clothes [*sic*]. Provided matters go off well, and opinion may be gained, the real good is matter of perfect indifference."

The tutor warms up to his task as soon as the project of marrying Victoria to his nephew Albert begins to mature. Here is a golden opportunity not only of enhancing the fortunes of the Coburgs but of giving the future Queen an adviser and a friend who might also be taught the difficult art of government. Another nephew, Ferdinand, Victoria's first cousin, had spent some time in Brussels in 1836, on his way to Lisbon, where he was to marry the Queen of Portugal, and had also been duly instructed. Stockmar had taken

* Memorandum prepared by Stockmar for Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort on their children's education.

Albert in hand. His master concentrates his attention on his young niece.

"A rule which you may early impress on your mind," he writes in 1837, during William IV's illness, "is that people are far from acting generally according to the dictates of their interests, but oftener in consequence of their passions, though it may even be injurious to their interests . . . The business of the highest in a State is certainly, in my opinion, to act with great impartiality and a spirit of justice for the good of all, and not of this or that party." A good Queen should remain "courageous, firm and honest." She should be "no one's tool" and preserve jealously her independence. She should never take a hasty decision, as it is far better to delay than to be obliged to recognize an error and to "retrace a false move." Besides, "except in time of war and civil feuds," there exists very rarely a necessity for hurrying matters. "Gain time," therefore, "let circumstances and the force of things bring about the disappointments which no human power could prevent coming sooner or later," and you will not be made responsible for them. This last reflection was, no doubt, inspired by the bitter experience which followed the Ten Days.

During the period of his life spent in England, before and after his first marriage, Leopold had been able to appreciate the harm done to the Hanoverian monarchs by their inability to adopt English ways and to speak correctly. To be recognized by all, a dynasty should be national, not only in policy but in manners and language. On June 23rd, after the Accession, he criticized the public declaration which stated that the young Queen had been "brought up" in England: "I should advise you to say as often as possible that you are *born* in England . . . As none of your cousins are born in England, it is your interest *de faire reporter cela fortement*. You never can say too much in praise of your country and its

inhabitants . . . Your being very national is highly important . . . The Established Church I also recommend strongly . . . you cannot say too much on the subject." In spite of his successful efforts in conciliating the sympathy of the Belgian Catholics, he felt that he would be in a stronger position if he were himself a Catholic. "You will do wisely," he had written a week before, "by showing yourself attached to the English Protestant Church as it exists in the State; you are particularly where you are (*sic*) because you are a Protestant." "To be National is the great thing," he declares a few days later. "If you are, you may be certain to win the love of the nation you govern."

He had refrained from going to England, during this critical period, for fear of wounding susceptibilities and stirring jealousies, but had sent Stockmar some time before, so that Victoria should have beside her a discreet and disinterested counsellor: "You will have him constantly near you without anybody having the right to find fault with it, and to be useful to you he should be near you. Stockmar would have the immense advantage, for so young a Queen, of being a living dictionary on all matters scientific and politic that happened these thirty years, which to you is of the greatest importance." How carefully his advice was followed we hear from the Queen's own Journal, where the short note: "Saw Stockmar" recurs again and again.

Leopold was evidently anxious that his niece should show firmness from the first. He repeats that confidence in self is the first condition of success. People do not trust those who do not trust themselves, and will take unfair advantage of any wavering. In order to be firm with caution, a Sovereign should never allow himself to be hurried. This may be done without wounding anybody's *amour-propre*, by observing certain methods of work.

The King hastens to impart to his niece the fruit of his own

experience, the knowledge of what he calls confidentially "the tricks of the trade." There are certain useful "habits of business." Devote some hours every day to public work. Tell your ministers "that you would be ready to receive those who wish to see you between the hours of eleven and half-past one." Do not let any question be forced upon your immediate decision. "Whenever a question is of some importance it should not be decided on the day when it is submitted to you. . . . Each Minister should bring his box with him, and when he submits to you the papers, explain them to you. Then you will keep the papers, either to think yourself upon them or to consult somebody, and either return them the next time you see the minister to whom they belong, or send them to him."

Outside business hours, the greatest discretion should be observed. It is the only way to avoid idle gossip. "Never permit people to speak on subjects concerning yourself or your affairs, without your having yourself desired them to do so." If people try to draw you out, decline to answer boldly, "they will leave you alone." If you show the right spirit from the first, "people must come to the opinion that it is of no use intriguing, because when her mind is once made up, and she thinks a thing right, no earthly power will make her change."

Rightly or wrongly, Leopold suspected that his correspondence with the Queen was opened and read at the Foreign Office; he wished to make sure that this should not always be the case. As a general rule, he did not object to this practice, because it gave him the means of conveying certain information without exposing himself. He gives an example in a letter dated October, 1837. The Prussian Government was still "plaguing him" concerning the fortresses of the Barrier and he wished to let them know certain things without telling them officially. His minister

was going to send a dispatch on the subject to the Belgian representative in Berlin *by post*, instead of by special courier: "The Prussians are sure to read it and to learn in this way what we wish them to hear."

Two months later, he sent to London a letter which may be considered as the last of these discourses on the art of government. Lord Melbourne had won his confidence long before as a man of character and great honesty. Having heard that the Prime Minister had the same regard for him and did not resent his influence, Leopold urged Victoria to consult him on the best means of safeguarding and developing the power of the Crown: "Monarchy to be carried on requires certain elements, and the occupation of the Sovereign must be constantly to preserve these elements, or, should they have been too much weakened by untoward circumstances, to contrive by every means to strengthen them again. You are too clever not to know that it is not the being called Queen or King which can be of the least consequence, when to the title there is not also annexed the power indispensable for the exercise of these functions. *All trades must be learnt, and nowadays the trade of a constitutional Sovereign, to do it well, is a very difficult one.*"

3

This last sentence summarizes the Coburg conception of modern monarchy and the methods to be used for realizing it. Victoria proved a good disciple—so good that, a few months later, on the question of the ratification of the XXIV Articles, when she was not yet twenty, she followed her own judgement instead of her uncle's, and refused to intervene in favour of Belgium. Albert, having been brought up in the same school, shared Stockmar's views on constitutional

government. When he began to take a share in public affairs, his actions and advice were inspired by the same ideas. The prestige of the Crown, which had fallen very low, was gradually restored in England. In Belgium, the Coburg dynasty was already established and the succession assured by the birth of the Duke of Brabant in 1835, and of his brother Philip in 1837. Ferdinand was ruling over Portugal. It seemed as if the success of the new political system was linked up with the success of the House.

It was not, however, for dynastic or political reasons only that Leopold rejoiced, on October 29th, 1839, over the engagement of Victoria and Albert. "Nothing could have given me greater pleasure than your dear letter. I had, when I saw your decision, almost the feeling of old Zacharias: 'Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace!'" He was so moved that he made Zacharias instead of Simeon sing the *Nunc Dimittis*. The memory of Charlotte was haunting him, and he found strange comfort in the thought that the younger generation would fulfil the expectations destroyed twenty-two years before. With the memory of his own experience still present in his mind, he applies himself to warn Victoria against possible difficulties: "You say most amiably that you consider it a sacrifice on the part of Albert. This is true in many points, because his position will be a difficult one; but much, I may say all, will depend on your affection for him." And three months later, after a visit paid to him by his nephew in Brussels: "Albert is quick, not obstinate, in conversation, and open to conviction if good arguments are brought forward. When he thinks himself right he only wishes to have it proved that he misunderstands the case, to give it up without ill-humour." It is far better to talk over these questions—referring to the Prince Consort's position in England—than to write about them.

With pathetic insistence Leopold tries to dispel any

unfavourable prejudice which Victoria might have entertained concerning Charlotte's character: "She was a high and noble-minded creature, and her affection and kindness for me very great." The advice is implicit: "I know that you have been told that she ordered everything in the house, and liked to show that she was mistress. It was not so. On the contrary, her pride was to make me appear to my best advantage, and even to display respect and obedience, when I least wanted it from her." He concedes that, owing to her education, her manners were not always good and that she grumbled sometimes when he found fault with them, but "nothing speaks such volumes as the positive fact of her manners getting quite changed within a year's time." Charlotte is almost held up as a model: "Our rule was never to permit one single day to pass over *ein Missverständnis*, however trifling it might be. She kept this compact most religiously, and at times even more so than myself, as in my younger days I was sometimes inclined to be sulky and silently displeased."

The happy marriage of Victoria meant far more to Leopold than a political or dynastic success. It may have been coldly prepared, but its realization revived his own youth and rekindled feelings which he thought no longer belonged to his daily experience.

His own marriage with Louise-Marie d'Orléans, in 1832, had been the result of diplomatic negotiations, the guarantee of France's friendship, the necessary adjunct of Belgium's connections with England and Germany. It had been for both a question of duty, imposed by political circumstances. The Princess was only twenty; she was, and remained devoted to France, to her family and to the Catholic religion. The King was forty-two and had become absorbed by his political work. The fact that the young Queen fell in love with her husband after their marriage, and that Leopold did

not for long respond to her feelings, aggravated the misunderstanding which separated them. Louise-Marie was popular on account of her kindness and her generosity to the poor, but she did not play an important part in Belgian life, being of frail health and unable or unwilling to exert herself. The misfortune of her family, at the time of the 1848 revolution, was her death-blow. She died at Ostend in October, 1850, retaining to the end her worship for her husband: "To be your friend, your only friend," she wrote to him a year before, "what more can I wish for in this world? I owe you all the happiness I ever had."

If Leopold did not make his wife happy, he employed himself from the beginning of his reign in defending the Orléans interests, pleading the King's cause with Victoria and her ministers, whenever French and English policy conflicted. He lavished advice on external and internal affairs on Louis-Philippe and his ministers. While the old King occasionally resented the patronizing tone of his son-in-law, who spoke of the trade of government as if he alone had mastered it, Thiers and Guizot appreciated Leopold's opinion. The latter has left in his *Memoirs* a subtle appreciation of the two monarchs. "I am convinced," he writes, "that King Leopold, although infinitely more careful and reserved in his language, has exerted a much greater personal influence on the government of Belgium, both in internal and in external affairs, than Louis-Philippe on the government of France. The one carefully avoided showing what he did, while the other was constantly haunted by the fear that justice would not be rendered to his efforts."

It may be regretted that the unfortunate French King did not listen more attentively to his son-in-law's warnings, but even had he done so, it is doubtful whether he could have avoided failure in the end. For what he needed most was tact, and tact is precisely the one virtue which cannot be

taught. It remains a closed book to many kind-hearted people and to cynics, even if they are called Louis-Philippe and Talleyrand, and requires a combination of sensitiveness and worldly wisdom which neither of them possessed.

The royal tutor, who became known as "the Uncle of Europe," felt also responsible for the success of his nephew Ferdinand who had married Doña Maria of Portugal. He sent General Goblet to advise him and completed his instructions by a series of letters which have been preserved.* Doña Maria stood for constitutional monarchy and her power was only established after a three years' civil war waged by Dom Pedro, her father, against the absolutist Dom Miguel. The same rules apply in England, Belgium or Portugal. "Discourage," writes Leopold, "any idea of counter-revolution, and be convinced that the action of time is powerful . . . I have just paid a visit to Ghent (formerly the centre of Orangism) and witnessed a marked change in public opinion. Had I attempted, two or three years ago, to bring about what happens by itself to-day, I should probably have failed. It is the story of all political revolutions. They can only be brought to an end through patience and moderation."

He wished that closer contact should be established between the Court of Lisbon and the people: "The Court has lived hitherto too far from the Portuguese nation. You must use your influence to put an end to this state of things . . . There should be between the Queen and her people a social circle through which contact could be established. I am writing to my nephew on this matter and wish you to remind him of it."

* Justo : *Le Général Goblet*.

4

The Belgian Congressists who, after the unfortunate experience of Dutch rule, drafted carefully the national charter in order to limit in every way the power of the Sovereign, would have been much surprised if they had been told that, in spite of the Constitution, or even with the help of the Constitution, the Belgian Kings would play such an important part in their country's history. A law must be interpreted; it cannot provide for unexpected circumstances. It can only be applied safely when modified by experience and adapted to reality. Had the first King of the Belgians been inclined towards absolutism, had he wished to assert his authority, no doubt the Constitution would have become still more "republican" than it was. Since he wished, on the contrary, to respect his oath, and to make his influence as unobtrusive as possible, he was able to use far more authority than the framers of the Constitution expected him to do.

According to them, he was to be an impartial arbiter between parties, a moderator, a peacemaker. Their ideal had been the benevolent and weak Regent, the "*bonhomme* Surlet," as he was called. On the day of his accession, certain Belgian papers urged the new King to follow this "worthy old man's" noble example. This plan might have worked for some time if the country had been well organized, internationally secure, sheltered from all civil trouble. It was futile in the circumstances which prevailed from 1831 to 1833.

In coming to Belgium, Leopold had walked straight into a crisis. Almost alone, he had to face the Ten Days' campaign and its external and internal consequences. He had no sooner assumed the Crown than the ground was cut away

from under his feet. This situation was largely due to the "good Regent," but neither the Regent nor the large majority of Belgian ministers and officers were capable of mastering it. Helped only by a few competent statesmen, Leopold had to do everything: direct diplomatic negotiations, reorganize the army, maintain order in the land, overcome the timidity of ministers and the opposition of Parliament. No one else possessed his experience in foreign affairs and his knowledge in the trade of government. "The state of affairs is such," he writes to Lord Durham in August 1831, "that I am constantly compelled to deal personally with things which should never be referred to the head of a Government."* And to Lehon, a few months later: "For Belgium as it is at present, *l'Etat, c'est moi*. It would therefore not be a matter of indifference to the Belgians if I absented myself, and they would be terrified if I went as far as Compiègne." With a touch of self-complacency he compares himself with Atlas, carrying his little kingdom on his shoulders.†

If he boasted of his achievements in his confidential correspondence, he always refrained from doing so in public or before people on whose discretion he could not rely. He carefully maintained the "reserved" attitude praised by Guizot and so seldom practised by his father-in-law. What mattered to him, before everything else, was that certain essential measures should be taken, not that the Sovereign should be praised for taking them. Self-assertion might have served its purpose for a time, but it was dangerous in a country which had so recently chafed under it. Very wisely, Leopold took full advantage of the critical situation which prevailed during the first two years of his reign, and of his superior knowledge of public affairs. He made himself

* Quoted by Buffin: *La Révolution belge*, etc.

† Juste: *Le Comte Lehon*.

indispensable, without ever showing that he was, remaining in the wings, transacting business as much as possible through confidential agents, suggesting decisions to ministers without claiming any credit for them. He realized the popular prestige which the Constitution enjoyed in the country, and never forgot that, according to it, he had only a minor part to play.

Leopold I is generally considered as the most successful constitutional monarch of modern times. The first reason for his success is that he accepted the charter loyally, without nursing the slightest intention of abolishing it or modifying it to his own advantage. Here again a distinction must be drawn between his private and public utterances. Writing to Metternich, whose anti-democratic views he knew only too well, he satirized the "childish quarrels" which divided Liberals and Catholics. "It would not be so bad if elections were not taking place every two years . . . Our Constitution is absurd." To Thiers he complained of the tedious delays involved by the parliamentary system: "It means an enormous waste of time." To Apponyi he declared that the best ministers are always the most exposed to attacks: "Once out of power, these men, so wise, so moderate as long as they worked with me, go over immediately to the Opposition, and the unfortunate King, who has only done what the majority wished him to do, finds himself without support."*

Towards the end of his life, his attitude seems to have changed. He no longer accepts parliamentary institutions as a necessary evil, and shows a genuine appreciation for certain features of the Belgian charter. To his daughter Charlotte, whom he wished to prepare for the "Mexican adventure," he declares that he always observed the Constitution in the spirit and in the letter: "In spite of its faults, it remains the foundation of public security."

* Quoted by Lichtervelde, *Leopold I*, p. 165.

Undermining it would have meant undermining Belgian patriotism, Belgian loyalty to the Crown. Nothing shows better the vast intelligence of the King than the way he adapted himself to the democratic aspirations of the people he was called upon to govern. Brought up in the tradition of the Old Regime, he was gradually drawn towards modern institutions because they expressed genuine aspirations which could not be thwarted without danger not only to the Crown but to the people themselves. The pride which Belgium took in her charter was one of the conditions of her existence as an independent State.

5

Articles 62 to 65 of the Constitution establish the relationship between the Sovereign and his ministers. The latter are nominated by the King, who cannot act without their approval, and are "responsible" for his and their actions.

This implies necessarily mutual confidence. Neither side must be kept in ignornace of the measures taken and even of the policy pursued by the other. Leopold made it a rule to preside over his ministerial council every Sunday and insisted on having every decision, even concerning the administration submitted to him. He did not hesitate to dismiss his Cabinet when he considered it necessary to do so, but as long as it was in power and retained his confidence, he abstained from taking any step which might injure its authority. He whole-heartedly approved Queen Victoria's attitude when she resisted Peel's demands concerning her change of Ladies in May 1839, but when, two years later, she pursued a correspondence with Melbourne on affairs of State after his fall, he also approved Stockmar's efforts to put an end to it. Stockmar, it will be remembered, held that

the only way for the Queen to "execute her functions was to be strictly honest to those men who at the time being were her ministers," and that it would be impossible for Melbourne "to carry on this secret commerce with the Sovereign for any length of time without exposing her character and creating mighty embarrassment in the quiet and regular working of the constitutional machine."*

At the time when Leopold urged Victoria to "be national," to love her country to the point of showing indulgence for its faults, he had already spent several years in practising this precept. It was far more difficult for this Anglo-Belgian Prince to "become Belgian" than for the English Princess to proclaim herself English. He did, however, all in his power to calm national susceptibilities. Of his English household he only retained a few servants. All Court appointments were given to Belgians. Young van Praet became his permanent secretary, and Edouard Conway, a Belgian of Irish descent, his *Intendant de la Liste civile*. Through the first he kept in close touch with the Liberals, through the second with the Catholics. He bought, in Walloon Belgium, the castle of Ardenne which became his favourite resort, and, in the Flemish provinces, the castle of Postel. He took besides, every year, a short holiday at Ostend. He did not hesitate to appear in public, on certain occasions, in the popular uniform of the Civic Guards, and adapted the English Court etiquette, to which he was accustomed, to the more easy-going habits of the Brussels *bourgeoisie*. He never allowed his German origins or his English sympathies to influence his policy, which, in external affairs, remained strictly bound up with national interests. In spite of the fact that he was less interested in economics than in politics, he soon realized the practical and business-like character of his subjects and devoted his

* *The Letters of Queen Victoria.*

energy to furthering their material prosperity. "My Belgians are very *positifs*," he wrote to Metternich, "and any reduction of income inflicts tortures upon them."

To his correspondents he frequently complained of the climate of the country, which did not suit him, but it was only long after his death that the Belgians heard that he had not enjoyed it. Although he hated the "national showers," he probably declared that they stimulated his zest for life. He took great trouble to develop social life at his Court and, thanks to his private means, was able to entertain lavishly. Most of the aristocratic families who had at first refused to acknowledge him, flocked to his brilliant receptions.

6

In spite of their dangerous activities, both the pro-French and Orangist minorities helped the King by providing him with an opportunity of emphasizing his national character.

The arrival in Brussels, in November 1833, of an Austrian and a Prussian representative was generally greeted as a good omen, but it was fraught with danger. Count Dietrichstein had been instructed by Metternich to watch events carefully and to warn him as soon as a weakening of the Franco-British entente should make an action of the Conservative Powers propitious. While urging Leopold to take measures which would have exasperated the opposition of the radical and pro-French elements, the German diplomats encouraged by their presence and advice the activity of Orangist circles in Brussels. The British representative, Sir Robert Adair, was also frequently seen in Orangist houses, such as those of the Trazegnies, Lalaing and Ligne. On the occasion of the sale of the Prince of Orange's stud, in March 1834, a subscription was launched by his partisans for the purpose of buying a few horses and offering them to their former owner.

The names of the subscribers appeared in the Orangist Press, which represented the gift as an imposing manifestation of Belgian loyalty to the former dynasty. In answer to these provocations, riots broke out in Brussels on April 6th, and the houses of some of the subscribers were plundered. In spite of their indignant protests, the foreign diplomats were obliged to recognize that their friends' intrigues were fruitless and that the people stood behind their King. The way order was rapidly restored without bloodshed showed them, besides, that the Government's authority was solidly established.

Anti-national agitation broke out, for the last time, during the restless period which preceded the ratification of the 1839 treaties. By this time pro-Dutch and pro-French were so weakened that they had to combine forces. They were only brought together by their common hostility towards the existing regime and the Catholic religion. The first consisted of reactionary aristocrats hostile to the revolution, and industrialists who wished to restore a customs union with Holland. The second included the last supporters of republican and socialistic tendencies, who considered that revolutionary ideals had been betrayed by the Congress. Such heterogeneous association could not last for long.

Leopold did not so much benefit from the defeat of his opponents as from the excesses of their attacks. To be called "crowned vampire," "lazy usurper," "commercial traveller in politics," by the same people who abused Congress, Parliament, and Constitution, could only increase his popularity. If he was an "adventurer," Belgium herself was a "den of robbers," and the "robbers" proudly hailed their chief. The King's interests became more and more linked up with those of the nation. He became the hero of national resistance. His enemies did for him what his best friends could never have done.

Leopold was wise enough never to urge against his opponents any measure which might have aroused suspicion. Revolutionaries and Orangists were allowed at first to pursue their propaganda, to print their pamphlets and to organize their meetings. Here again they rendered the greatest service. The Constitution left the Government almost powerless to control public disturbances and restore order. The riots of April 1834 provided an excellent opportunity for strengthening the Executive and restoring the balance between the three Powers in the State. Events had shown that coercive measures were indispensable.

7

In this matter, as in so many others, the King applied the theory of government which he imparted, a few years later, to his young niece. When pressed to take a decision, the Sovereign made himself inaccessible and retired for a few days to Laeken, in order to "think it over." There followed an exchange of correspondence between van Praet and the ministers. After demanding full explanations, Leopold either gave his consent or refused it. In the latter case, he justified his refusal on the ground that the step contemplated did not agree with the programme drawn up when the ministry was formed. He never allowed the Royal signature to become a mere formality. Without infringing the limits imposed upon him by the Constitution, he insisted on retaining all his prerogatives within these limits.

The King fully realized the danger of one of the powers conferred on him—the power of dissolution—and only used it exceptionally and after mature consideration. Never did he practise the art of temporizing with greater effect than

during political crises. When a deadlock was reached, he did not hesitate to leave the country for a few days in order to allow time for political passions to subside.

He resented the absolute rule of a majority exerting at the same time the legislative and the administrative powers, depriving the Executive of its controlling influence. Such a situation he considered as "anti-constitutional." For that very reason, he refused to identify himself with any particular party and took his stand on the defence of the general interests of the country, common to all.

Most of the characteristics of his policy will be found again in that of his successors. Leopold did not only evolve a new theory of government, he founded a tradition. His son, grandson and great-grandson remained faithful to his teaching. They were strictly national, respected the Constitution, made full use of the powers and influence conferred on them and refrained from taking rash decisions. They inherited the Coburg method. They also inherited the Coburg manner, that strange alloy of aloofness and simplicity which gave so much value to their words and actions, and often overcame the resistance of their political opponents better than the most conclusive argument. Leopold's successors were confronted with difficulties and tragedies which their ancestor had not foreseen, but they were born in the country and brought up in the national religion; they belonged to Belgium and were acknowledged by all as her legitimate Sovereigns. The position of the founder of the dynasty was very different. He was a Protestant, a foreigner, accepted by the Congress only after the failure of Nemours' candidature; his accession to the throne was bound up with certain promises which were not fulfilled by the Powers. He was violently opposed by vested interests and by some of the oldest families in the land, and openly denounced by the republicans. It needed more than

wisdom and encyclopædic knowledge to overcome these difficulties. It needed a perfect temper, a cool head, a great courage and, above all, a sympathetic understanding of friends and foes alike. The triumph of Leopold I was a triumph of tact.

CHAPTER V

NEUTRALITY "LOYAL AND STRONG" (1839—1848)

I

DURING the years which followed the settlement of the Belgian question, the task of government was greatly facilitated by the union of parties. As long as danger threatened Belgium from outside, all patriots remained bound by the pledge they had taken in 1830, to ignore their differences and devote themselves to the common interests of the country. All governments formed by the King up to 1847 had been national governments and, with the single exception of the short-lived Lebeau Cabinet of 1840, had included Catholic and Liberal ministers. The cleavage between Majority and Opposition had never followed party lines. During the crises caused by the Ten Days and the final signature of the Treaty of 1839, both Liberals and Catholics were divided between extremists and moderates. The first wished to resist the Conference's decision, even by force; the others were convinced that the country had no other alternative but to negotiate and, ultimately, to submit to the decisions of the Powers. Both sides took their stand on patriotic grounds and based their views on patriotic arguments. Had it been otherwise, it is to be doubted whether the King's efforts would have been successful. A divided Belgium could scarcely have resisted the combined action of revolutionaries and Orangists, in the face of a hostile Europe. There is therefore a historic foundation for the motto chosen in 1830: *L'Union fait la force*. The lesson

of 1789, when Liberals and Catholics, Vonckists and van der Nootists had come to grips on the morrow of their short triumph, had not been lost. The fatal mistake was not repeated.

Another circumstance which simplified the administration of internal affairs was that the electorate included only 55,000 voters out of a total population of nearly 4,000,000. One of the most liberal features of the Constitution was that no qualifications whatsoever were required to sit in the Chamber, but property was considered in those days as a guarantee of independence, and no elector was admitted to the poll unless he paid at least 50 florins in taxes, in the towns, and 20, in the countryside. This was not a conservative measure because the *cens* was higher in France. As for universal suffrage, it was considered by the most "advanced" as endangering political progress. The "bogey" of the 1830 Liberals was not vested interests but aristocratic privilege, and the feeling was so strong against it that even the electors possessing only intellectual qualifications who had been allowed to vote for the Congress were denied the right of taking part in parliamentary elections. Under a free regime, property appeared to be within the reach of all and was looked upon as a safeguard against corruption. There is no doubt that the *censitaires* were considered as an élite, and a limited electorate as the best obstacle to a return to "despotism."* Not before 1848 was this political dogma seriously questioned.

The King and Government only were in direct contact with Parliament, and Parliament with a small fraction of the people. All was done to encourage trade and industry, but it was not thought possible to check the social consequences of the industrial revolution, which were as disastrous in Belgium as anywhere else. To all appearances

* Pirenne: *Histoire de Belgique*, VII, 98, 117.

success crowned these efforts; banking activities increased and the number of limited liability companies grew tenfold within ten years—from 1831 to 1840. After a temporary set-back, material progress was resumed, thanks to a series of favourable commercial treaties. Any State interference would have been resented as arbitrary and disastrous. The gospel of freedom was implicitly accepted in economic as in political matters.

We shall say very little, therefore, of an aspect of Belgian life which did not directly affect political activity, but future events cannot be properly understood unless we remember that, behind the official prosperity of the country, stood as a dark background the misery of over a million people. A parliamentary inquiry on industrial conditions made in 1843 shows a gross disproportion between salaries and the cost of living, and a reckless exploitation of child and female labour. In some places children were made to work when nine years old; both women and children were employed in the hardest kind of labour, even at the bottom of the mines. The hours were the same for all—from twelve to fourteen per day. In Liège the proportion of men declared incapable of military service was 26 per cent. Drunkenness and prostitution spread in every town.*

The situation in the countryside was scarcely more favourable. In Flanders the introduction of mechanical mills was ruining the home linen industry, which had employed, at the beginning of the century, nearly one-third of the population. Misery was further increased, after 1845, by a blight which ruined the crops of potatoes and rye. A regular famine and an epidemic of typhoid fever spread over northern Belgium in 1848. In certain places the number of deaths was four times larger than the number of births.

* *Enquête sur la question des classes ouvrières, Bruxelles, 1846-1848.*

The Government took certain measures to bring relief to the people by allowing the free import of corn and lowering railway rates, but on the whole these calamities were taken as unavoidable evils, beyond the reach of State control.

2

Nothing shows better the futility of party politics than the discussions which took place in the Belgian Chamber from 1839 to 1847. But for a parliamentary enquiry which led to no practical result, the social problem was scarcely dealt with. International difficulties, the consolidation of the country's neutral status, were left in the skilful hands of the King and his ministers. While 25 per cent. of the people were overworked and brought to the verge of starvation, politicians were engaged in heated quarrels which appear to-day without interest or significance. While the large majority of the children of the poor received no education at all, the deputies' attention became more and more absorbed in the rivalry of Church and State for the education of the children of the middle classes, the future electors. For, strange to say, it was this *question scolaire* which was the pivot of Belgian politics up to the end of the century. Belgium suffered from the consequences of the submission exacted from her in 1839. The army, so carefully organized, having proved useless, military questions lost a great deal of their interest. Neutrality, more and more narrowly interpreted, became an excuse for indifference to foreign affairs. Parochialism asserted itself in every direction, unionism declined rapidly, and the Catholic-versus-Liberal contest degenerated into a family quarrel.

To realize the importance taken by the scholastic question,

it must be remembered that it had not been solved by the Constitution. Article 17 proclaimed the "freedom" of education, but how should this freedom be interpreted? The electorate was almost evenly divided between Catholics and anti-Catholics, people who believed that an education in which religion is ignored deprives the children of moral guidance, and people who believed that the teaching of religion encourages superstition and is contrary to the doctrine of free citizenship inherited from the French Revolution. A compromise might have been reached if the Catholics had contented themselves with claiming a subsidy for religious or "free" schools similar to that received by State or neutral schools, and if the Liberals had refrained from abusing the advantage enjoyed by the latter. The direct cause of the "School war" which raged during the reigns of Leopold I and his successor was that both sides claimed monopoly of education in a country strongly divided on religious questions. The purely dogmatic argument that State schools being "neutral," Catholic demands were not justified, was manifestly biased. On the other hand, the attempts made by bishops to obtain some control over official schools were in direct contradiction to the constitutional principle of the separation of Church and State.

Both sides invoked freedom, but both sides were obsessed with the wish to dominate the other. It was not, properly speaking, a quareel between Church and State; it was a quarrel concerning the use which could be made of State institutions to further the interests of one party against the other. When the Liberals came into power, after the final break-up of the Union, they were accused of poisoning the mind of the young against religion and of persecuting free teaching. When the Catholics succeeded them, they were denounced for neglecting State schools in order to attract scholars to their own establishments, and at other times,

for introducing religious teaching—even when optional—in places where no reference to religion should ever be made. No wonder that the King deplored the “petty bickerings” of the politicians which so hampered his work!

3

Aware that these differences assumed a disproportionate importance in the political life of the nation, Leopold did his best to maintain the union of parties as long as possible. In a letter to Metternich, dated May 1840, he criticized the “complaining habits” of his subjects, which had led them to upset the administration of M. de Theux, “who had been minister for six years and served the country with honour.” This internal crisis coincided with the Eastern crisis which threatened the country’s security, and the King called back Lebeau to the ministry of Foreign Affairs. For the first time, the Cabinet included no Catholic. In spite of the fact that its programme remained strictly Unionist, the Right opposed the Government, and the Senate voted an address to the King asking him to stop the “political strife which divided the country.” The Sovereign was urged by Lebeau to dissolve Parliament, but knowing that such a dissolution would put an end to Unionism, he declined to do so. Dissolution was, in his opinion, a prerogative only to be used in “exceptional circumstances.” He declared that this time “it would have caused a profound division in a country sufficiently weak and exposed owing to its geographical position.” After some delay he called the Catholic Nothomb into power and placed him at the head of a Unionist ministry. Lebeau passed into Opposition and attacked the Government on party grounds. “This is

where Burke and Fox take leave of each other!" exclaimed the new Premier.

Four years later, the Liberal ranks having been reinforced at the elections, Leopold hoped to hand over the power to a new Unionist Government under the Liberal Rogier. The latter, however, only accepted on the condition that the King would promise to dissolve Parliament if a conflict arose. The Sovereign refused and called to the head of affairs another moderate Liberal, van de Weyer, who was obliged to resign in March 1846. Once more, Rogier wished to exact from Leopold a formal agreement to use his prerogative if necessary; once more he met with a refusal. "The King alone must remain judge of the opportuneness of taking such a decision . . ." wrote van Praet; "any other course would be destructive to the balance of powers established by the Constitution."* The next ministry, headed by a Catholic, was the last Government of Union, and the King, who had been subjected to violent attacks from the Opposition, was obliged to give way when the elections of 1847 gave a decisive majority to the Liberals.

He had not been able to preserve the Union, but he had not sacrificed his prerogative of dissolving Parliament if and when he thought it in the interest of the country to do so. The service he rendered to Belgium by resisting Rogier's demands was only fully appreciated in later days. His attitude was again consistent with the advice he had given to Victoria: Preserve all your rights within the Constitution; delay important decisions as long as possible; we know the ministers we have but we don't know those who might follow them. It stands in strong contrast with the vain efforts made, at the same time, by Louis-Philippe to break the French Opposition and shelve its demands for electoral reform. Leopold knew how and when to give way and,

* Discailles, *Charles Rogier*.

what is more, to do so graciously and loyally. He supported his Liberal Government as he had supported his former Unionist Governments. He even suggested the idea of adding to it a few "advanced Liberals" who would prepare themselves for the exercise of power and "would be less dangerous inside the Cabinet than outside." Far from resenting the necessity of choosing a minister with whom he had recently been in conflict, he took Rogier immediately into his confidence and contented himself with reminding him that party politics could not be carried too far in a country placed in the situation which Belgium occupied in Europe: "This country is poor in political ideas," he wrote on July 8th, 1847, "and seems often inclined to forget the bases upon which her existence is founded. . . There are two kinds of State: the first exists through their own strength, the others exist on certain conditions which depend on the convenience of the strong States, and on the part which the great European family wishes them to play. Belgium belongs to the second category. Without flattering myself, I think I can say that the position I have given her in Europe is far better than anything which could have been expected in 1830. Nothing should be done to endanger it." Later he added: "We should be careful not to allow ourselves to be dominated by political associations. If Belgium was placed in the situation of the Sandwich Islands . . . we should be perfectly free to give ourselves the most democratic regime possible. Nobody would worry about it."*

With the same tact, the King applied himself to overcome the hostility between Church and State which might have resulted from party government under a Liberal Premier. This was difficult because the Constitution prevented the establishment of any form of *concordat*, and because the leaders of the Church would have resented interference

* Discailles, *Charles Rogier*.

in religious affairs, particularly from a Protestant Sovereign. Leopold succeeded in overcoming this obstacle by establishing personal contact with Rome, through Metternich. He obtained the nomination of a nuncio in Brussels with whom he hastened to enter into friendly and confidential relations either directly or through Conway. Mgr. Pecci, later Pope Leo XIII, was for several years Papal nuncio in Brussels and strongly supported the King's policy of Union by curbing the zeal of some of the Belgian bishops. The Sovereign was consulted in all important Church affairs and influenced the nomination of the higher clergy. Without infringing the Constitution or offending political and clerical susceptibilities, a bridge was thus thrown across the gap which threatened to divide the country.*

4

Leopold's well-deserved reputation is founded on his success as a constitutional monarch, and the way he exercised the "trade of government" was certainly the most original of his achievements. He was the first Sovereign on the Continent to practise Stockmar's theories and to conciliate the claims of the Executive and Legislative powers. But he would never have been such a good constitutional King had he not been at the same time a born diplomat. Diplomacy requires the same qualities of firmness and tolerance, tact and foresight which are indispensable in the exercise of power under a parliamentary regime. It is based on the respect of treaties as parliamentary government is based on the respect of the Constitution. It is confronted with the same problem of interpreting and adapting a formal contract to new circumstances, arising from the fluctuations of internal and external politics. The first King of the

* *Papiers du Vicomte de Conway.*

Belgians excelled in both vocations, but he preferred undoubtedly to practise his skill in the wider field of European affairs rather than in the narrow field of home politics. If government was his trade, diplomacy might almost be called his hobby. He frequently complained of the obstacles he had to overcome as a Sovereign, while he went out of his way to try and solve European difficulties.

He had, from the beginning, assumed the leadership in the conduct of foreign affairs. His first task, after the 1839 settlement, was to reach an understanding with Holland, concerning the execution of the treaty. William I had abdicated in October 1840 in favour of his son the Prince of Orange, who had been Leopold's unsuccessful rival in the courtship of Princess Charlotte of England and had taken his revenge during the Ten Days' campaign. Embittered no doubt by these memories, William II delayed negotiations. He might have been encouraged in the hope of recovering part of the Belgian provinces by certain overtures of Thiers, concerning a possible partition of the kingdom, and by the plot engineered in 1841 by two Belgian generals for the abduction of the Royal family. But the Dutch Government and its representative in Brussels were no party to these intrigues, and William II agreed finally to come to terms with Belgium. A convention was signed in August 1843 settling a series of outstanding questions.

Leopold's constant preoccupation was to consolidate the position occupied by Belgium in Europe. He realized how fragile would be the guarantees given by the treaties unless he obtained the good will and respect of the Powers. Any pretext might be seized upon to accuse Belgium of violating a neutrality which hitherto had been of a purely negative and ill-defined character. As long as the entente between England and France was preserved, the country's position

was not directly threatened, but owing to the political conditions prevailing in Paris, this entente was far from secure. Any conflict might jeopardize again the integrity and independence of the new State.

The Tsar remained obdurate. He had taken the pretext of the engagement of Polish officers in the Belgian army not to enter into diplomatic relations with Leopold. The German Princes with whom the King had entertained close relations in his youth were equally hostile. They treated all Coburgs as upstarts and affected never to mention their name. The extraordinary success of a House which had given a Prince Consort to England, Kings to Belgium and Portugal, and contracted two marriages with the French Royal family, all within seven years, was looked upon with a suspicion not untinged with envy. Prussia and Austria never lost an opportunity of finding fault with Belgium. In 1836 they had questioned her right to protect her northern frontier by erecting fortifications on the Démer. Their representatives in Brussels had favoured Orangist intrigues and had been hastily withdrawn when Leopold refused to dismiss the foreign officers whom he had engaged in his army. Frederick William considered Belgium as a satellite of France and her King as a tool of Louis-Philippe. As late as 1842, he declared to Stockmar that "Belgium could not last more than two generations and would be absorbed by one of her neighbours." Leopold was too much opposed to the Prussian policy of German unification to attempt to conciliate a Sovereign who treated him with scant courtesy. He took more trouble over Metternich, with whom he had been in correspondence since the Congress of Vienna, and for whom he entertained a sincere admiration. In a number of letters he endeavoured to show him that, far from being a revolutionary nation in the wake of France, Belgium was at heart deeply religious, and retained her monarchic

traditions and her full independence. It was uphill work, as the head of the Holy Alliance nursed a deep grievance against the young State, but in the end the King's tireless patience succeeded in partly removing the Prince's prejudices and in arousing in Austria some sympathy for his policy, which had hitherto only found favour among the Liberal Powers.

This was particularly necessary because the Anglo-French entente had now been considerably weakened. Louis-Philippe found it more and more difficult to restrain the zeal of some of his ministers, while Palmerston, after the settlement of the Belgian question, grew profoundly suspicious of French policy.

Ever since 1836 the idea had been mooted of a close economic understanding amounting to a customs union between France and Belgium. The depression which followed the ratification of the XXIV Articles, in 1839, provoked a movement in favour of this project among Belgian industrialists, who hoped to recover in the French market what they had lost in Holland and Germany after the establishment of prohibitive tariffs. The negotiations started in 1840 were severely criticized by Palmerston, who considered that a customs union could only lead to political absorption and was inconsistent with neutrality. Leopold soon recognized that it would be impossible to give the treaty a "purely commercial character," and persuaded his ministers first to postpone the scheme and later to seize this opportunity of asserting Belgian economic as well as political independence.

5

The friction which arose between the two Liberal Powers over the projected customs union was only a minor aspect

of a much graver misunderstanding which led to an international crisis of the first magnitude.

Following the successful revolt of his Egyptian Viceroy, Mehemet Ali, in 1839, the Sultan had appealed to the Powers to obtain restitution of his possessions. The latter, with the exception of France, were prepared to take collective measures against the rebel Viceroy, but Louis-Philippe, prompted by Thiers, sided with Mehemet. The Movement Party was still alive in Paris, and the idea of restoring France's influence in Egypt appealed to the people and awoke Napoleonic memories. This attitude provoked a strong reaction among the Conservative Powers, hostile to the monarchy of the Revolution and suspicious of French territorial ambitions. What made the conflict particularly dangerous for Belgium was that Palmerston, determined not to see the French seize a key position on the road to India, signed a treaty, in July 1840, with the other Powers, guaranteeing the integrity of Turkish possessions. The entente between England and France, on which the safety of Belgium still depended, was in great danger of being immediately broken, owing to the military preparations made by Thiers, who threatened to carry the conflict on to the Rhine.

Following the French mobilization on April 4th, Leopold, through his minister Lebeau, advised Belgian representatives abroad that the country would take all measures deemed necessary "to insure the respect of her neutrality." This attitude was obviously concordant with the 1839 treaty; in fact, the Belgian Government might have been blamed for not taking it. But both Prussia and France, ignoring Belgian interests, interpreted neutrality to their own advantage. To the first it served as a barrier against France, like the fortresses erected in 1815; to the second it served as a protection against an aggression from the North. Thiers

reserved himself the right, if need be, of sending his troops through a neutral country, while Frederick William's minister wrote that Belgian armaments were "inconsistent with the country's neutrality," and that "in the event of hostilities, Belgium should place her trust in the treaties and in the Powers' good faith." Thanks to Louis-Philippe's intervention, however, Thiers soon took a saner view of the situation and declared that Belgian neutrality was, for him, "an article of faith." Prussia's veto was more difficult to overcome, because Palmerston, who had been consulted by both parties, was inclined to compromise. Although agreeing in principle with the Belgian Government, he suggested that the Powers should be consulted—obviously the Powers opposed to France—before taking military measures. But the King and Lebeau maintained their decision and thus established an invaluable precedent confirming the right of Belgium to defend herself on all her frontiers—a right without which neutrality would have been a sham.

This clarified the situation but did not altogether remove the danger of a possible invasion. Leopold applied himself to gain time and gradually to prevent a conflict which threatened his kingdom and his personal position, as a close relation of the British and French Royal families.

As early as October 1839, he had been asked by Metternich, whom he met in Wiesbaden, to make proposals to Victoria and Louis-Philippe in order to maintain unity between the Powers. His mediation having failed, he endeavoured to obtain a solution which might at least save the face of the French King before his subjects. Palmerston, who had manœuvred France into an untenable position, since she was now completely isolated in Europe, was inclined to push his advantage home. Leopold foresaw that if a bitter humiliation were inflicted on France, Thiers and

his party would obtain the upper hand and leave no alternative to Louis-Philippe but to wage war. For months he alternatively urged the Queen and Melbourne, on the one hand, and Metternich on the other, to adopt a moderate attitude. He knew Metternich's fear of revolution and his belief that a European conflagration would release dangerous forces. He was also aware of Victoria's personal sympathies for the old French King and of her growing impatience at Palmerston's overbearing attitude towards her.

His letters to the Austrian Chancellor are a model of diplomatic skill. He begs him to arbitrate between France and England: "The English are really frivolous in their behaviour to France, and I ask your Excellency's aid. You are in a good position with them just now, and whatever advice you give will make a great impression in England. A tolerable understanding between France and England means peace, a breach means war. Hitherto all the gains have been on the side of England. . . It would be a mistake to think that French vanity can be wounded indefinitely with impunity."* In August he writes again from Claremont, describing the reaction which the signature of the four-Power treaty had provoked in Paris: "Thiers is fearfully embittered. . . The whole thing was regarded as an alliance of the four Powers against France, who once more stands alone. The feeling, even of the more moderate, was "if that is the case, we shall show them that we can still fight, and so on. . ." Do not imagine that this outburst of public opinion in France is mere bravado. There is an element of bravado in it, but there is also a large and dangerous truth in it, and it is urgently necessary to reunite France with the four other Powers."

At the same time, Leopold used his influence with Louis-Philippe to calm the exasperation which he described so

* Quoted by Corti, *Leopold I*, p. 124.

vividly to Metternich. After he had assured himself that the French would not take a rash decision, he went again to Wiesbaden in September, and informed the Austrian Chancellor that Louis-Philippe was disposed to yield provided some honourable compromise could be arranged. Metternich suggested that Mehemet should keep Egypt and restore Syria to the Sultan. It was agreed that this plan should be communicated to London. All these negotiations had been carried out secretly. Apart from his secretaries, the King seems only to have confided in one or two Belgian statesmen. The Ministry was only kept informed in so far as it was necessary for the conduct of Belgian affairs.*

At the same time, Leopold persuaded Victoria to adopt the plan and, in order to convince her of the pacific disposition of Louis-Philippe, enclosed an extract from one of his letters in which he alluded to the union of England and France as "*la base du repos du monde*" and declared that, if the Powers did not wish to humiliate France, "the Eastern question could easily be arranged."† It was agreed that France should be sounded as to her intentions, in order to find a basis of negotiations.

Meanwhile the bombardment of Beirut and the blockade of Alexandria by the British fleet had had a sobering influence on Mehemet Ali, and when Guizot succeeded Thiers at the head of the French Government, it was possible to arrange that, without depriving the Viceroy of Egypt, the Powers, including France, should jointly guarantee the future integrity of the Turkish Empire. Palmerston, however, had no mind to let the French down so lightly, and persisted in his intention of taking Acre and carrying the war into Syria. This provoked a new intervention by Leopold, this time on the Prussian side. "We risk the fall of Guizot," he

* Lichtervelde, *Leopold I^{er}*, p. 308.

† *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, I., 296.

wrote to von Bülow, the Prussian Ambassador in London, "and what will happen then? Good God! have we all gone mad? . . . For Heaven's sake, let us end it at once. If you let down the present ministry in France I shall certainly mobilize here, and that will encourage Germany to mobilize, and, with God's help, we will bring such a confusion into Europe that everything there will move, and the Communists will have their chance." He also showed to the Austrian Minister in Brussels a letter from Louis-Philippe in which the latter declared once more his intention of striving for peace: "But let there be no mistake; if I am pushed to extremes, I shall go to war."* Besides impressing upon the Conservative Powers the urgency of a prompt solution, the King wished to use their influence in London to overcome Palmerston's resistance. After the fall of Acre, an agreement was finally reached, following the Metternich-Leopold formula, which led to the treaty of July 13th, 1841, settling for a time the position in the East.

Belgium had emerged from the crisis intact and strengthened. For the first time her neutrality was clearly defined. In opening Parliament, on November 10th, the Sovereign was able to declare without fear of contradiction at home or abroad: "Neutrality is the true foundation of our policy. Our constant aim must be to maintain it sincere, loyal and strong."

After this diplomatic success, Leopold was in a far better situation to meet the French overtures, made in 1842, concerning the projected customs union. Faced by the opposition of the Powers, Guizot contented himself with a limited convention favourable to both countries, which prepared the commercial treaty of December 1845. Meanwhile Belgium had negotiated similar arrangements with the Zollverein in 1844, and with Holland in 1845. These

* Letter from Count Dietrichstein to Metternich, November 16th, 1840.

commercial treaties, besides putting an end to the 1839 depression, established the impartial economic position of Belgium in Europe, as the political crisis of 1840-1841 had established her impartial political position.

6

At the age of fifty, the first King of the Belgians had reached the peak of his political career. His health remained good, his faculty for work unimpaired. He had every right to be satisfied with the results he had achieved for Belgium and for himself—as his personal interest was identified with that of his kingdom. Had not the country survived the cruel ordeal of 1839 and the economic depression which followed? Had she not established her right to defend herself, and to conclude commercial treaties which did not impair her independence? Neutrality had been tested. Both England and France recognized that the guarantee it implied not only existed on paper but was a living reality. Belgium had shown that it was far more important, in the interest of peace, that she should remain free and strong than that she should be used as a bulwark or a buffer State by a stronger Power or combination of Powers. The humiliations to which the new State had been subjected since its foundation had been avenged. As Sovereign of one of the smallest European nations, Leopold had been the main agent in preserving his country, in consolidating her position, and in solving the worst crisis which the world had experienced since Waterloo. His views had prevailed in London, in spite of Palmerston, and in Paris, in spite of Thiers. The great Metternich had followed his suggestions. If Prussia and Russia still held aloof, their statesmen had been obliged to acknowledge the wisdom of

the plan he had engineered. The Eastern crisis, which threatened to revive the Holy Alliance against France, had been averted; England and France, the two sponsors of Belgium, were again on friendly terms. For the first time in history, Belgium had become an instrument of peace instead of a cause of war. Instead of shirking the obligations of neutrality, the King had assumed them boldly, with all their implications, including military defence. He had taken the Powers at their word and shown them that the treaties on which the existence of Belgium was based could, and should, be interpreted in Belgian terms, not in French or German or even in British terms. According to Pirenne's words, he had proved that "Belgium was neither a satellite of France nor a bridgehead against France, and that she interpreted her neutrality as a safeguard both of her own independence and of general peace."*

At long last the new State could rightly be called the "Keystone of Europe."

7

The political upheaval of 1848 still further strengthened Leopold's position and gave him, for a time, an unrivalled prestige even among the Conservative Powers. It brought, however, in its wake a series of social and political consequences inimical to his policy, which threw their shadow on the last years of his reign.

When the King, writing to Metternich, evoked the phantom of a social revolution, he was sincerely convinced that a European war might shake society to its foundations, but he did not believe that Louis-Philippe's rule over France was so fragile as to collapse after a few street riots. Neither

* Pirenne: *Histoire de Belgique*, VII, 90.

did he foresee that the revolutionary movement started in Paris, in February, would soon spread all over Europe, threatening the existing régimes in Italy, Germany, Bohemia, Hungary, Rumania and even Austria, the citadel of monarchical institutions.

He was, of course, aware that some French and Belgian disciples of Saint-Simon had pursued their propaganda in Brussels at the beginning of his reign, making a few converts among the "advanced" Liberals, and that a series of lectures given, in 1845, by Victor Considérant had awakened an echo among those who sympathized with the misery of the industrial workers. He knew also that some Catholics, hostile to the industrial revolution and influenced by the writings of Lamennais, had tried to rouse the people in the Flemish countryside. Brussels was, in these years, the refuge of foreign agitators who had been obliged to leave their native countries. In 1847, Karl Marx himself and his friend Engels had established the headquarters of their *Deutscher Arbeit-Verein* in a cabaret on the Grande Place. But the Belgian revolutionaries did not agree. Some were mild republicans claiming general suffrage, others romantic socialists denouncing the abuses of Capitalism. It is doubtful whether any of them understood the Communist Manifesto launched by Marx in 1848. Being "free-thinkers" they soon parted company with the Christian democrats led by Bartels, whose activities lost all influence after they had been condemned by the high clergy.

The Belgian people, in spite of the deplorable conditions created by industrialism, were not seriously affected by the movement. The peasants, who were still the great majority, followed the lead of the clergy; the town workers were illiterate and lacked organization. Socialistic propaganda remained purely theoretical, a subject for debate among a group of intellectuals forming the *Association démocratique*.

Besides, the Government had been careful not to exasperate these extremists. They were free to hold their meetings and publish their pamphlets under the "most liberal Constitution in Europe."

The news of the abdication and of the flight of Louis-Philippe on February 24th had the effect of a bombshell. The rumour spread that the French were marching upon Brussels. Crowds rushed to the banks to withdraw their money and in a few days State funds dropped to 50 per cent. of their normal value. "I am very unwell," wrote Leopold to Queen Victoria, on the 26th, "in consequence of the awful events in Paris. How will this end? Poor Louise is in a state of despair which is pitiful to behold. What will soon become of us, God alone knows; great efforts will be made to revolutionize this country . . . Against France we, of course, have a right to claim protection from England and the other Powers. I can write no more . . ."*

Later the same day he may well have been reassured by his Prime Minister. Rogier had received in the morning a letter from his friend Considérant, the French agitator, warning him that in a few hours "a hundred thousand men, electrified by enthusiasm," would "hail the Republic in the streets of Brussels," and that if he dared to oppose strength to the popular movement he "would lose everything." With this letter in his pocket, the Minister left the Palace, after arranging with the King certain measures for the protection of the frontier, and walked to Parliament, where he expected to meet a stormy House. But instead of seizing this opportunity for causing trouble the Catholic opposition rallied round the Government, as in the old days of the Union. External danger had appeased all internal conflicts.† A republican member having declared a few days later that

* *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, I, 176.

† Discailles, *Charles Rogier*.

"Liberty would henceforth go round the world," another deputy retorted, among unanimous applause, that "in order to go round the world, Liberty need not pass through Belgium." The country remained so calm that no extraordinary measure was taken in the capital or in the provinces, except the expulsion of a few foreign agitators.

The only reaction to the French revolution was the prompt adoption of the electoral reform contemplated by the Government. With great foresight the authors of the Constitution had made provision for this reform, by stating that the amount of taxes required for the franchise "could not be higher than 100 florins or lower than 20." This popular measure could therefore be carried out without involving the country in the troublesome delays of a "revision."

As early as March 4th, the King was again full of confidence. Writing to van de Weyer, he says that "the people had shown that the country deserved the name of nation." His "noble task" of 1831 had become a labour of love. He speaks with genuine emotion of "our good and admirable Belgium," and witnesses with a smile the critical situation of the scornful German and Austrian Princes who had for so long taunted him with the title of "revolutionary monarch." "Germany is in an awful state," he writes to Queen Victoria on the 25th. "For years all sorts of people had been stirring them up, and half-measures, seeming dishonest, of the Sovereigns had done harm. Curious that I, who in fact was desirous of retiring from politics, should be on the Continent, the only Sovereign who stood the storm, though I am at ten hours' distance from Paris." The King of Prussia was compelled to yield to public opinion and a German Parliament was meeting in Frankfurt; Metternich had been obliged to flee from Vienna; even in Holland the King had been forced to accept a constitution based on the

Belgian model. Moderation and understanding had proved stronger than the mailed fist. Constitution had been the only remedy against revolution. The Stockmar theory was vindicated not only by the success of those who adopted it but also by the failure of those who scorned it.

8

Able to rely on the loyalty of his subjects, Leopold was in a strong position to face the dangers which threatened his frontiers.

It had first been feared that William II might take the opportunity of this crisis to launch a second attack on Belgium. According to reports sent by the Belgian representative at The Hague, the Dutch were concentrating their forces on their southern frontier. These apprehensions, however, were soon removed and the incident provoked a *rapprochement*, which led to an entente for common defence in case of French aggression.

The attitude of the *Gouvernement provisoire* established in Paris was, however, far from reassuring. While Lamartine declared to the Belgian representative that his country's neutrality would be respected, some of his colleagues were in touch with Belgian and French republicans, who openly prepared an armed expedition. Attempts made on March 25th at Quiévrain and, four days later, at the village of Risquons-Tout failed completely. During this short crisis the Powers' guarantee of Belgian neutrality was again confirmed, Palmerston strengthening his declaration by stating that, should any part of Belgian territory be conquered by the invader, the Powers were under the obligation of restoring it after the conflict.

Never had the prestige of Belgium and her King stood so

high. During the Eastern crisis of 1840-1841 Leopold had shown Europe that the existence of an independent Belgium was an essential condition of international peace. But this axiom was not recognized by all. England was still apprehensive of French influence. The Conservative Powers, especially Prussia and Russia, had not yet forgotten their grievances against a small "revolutionary State," which had upset the Vienna system and deprived the House of Orange of part of its possessions. Belgium had a bad reputation. She had risen too many times against the Princes to be trusted and, what was worse, in modern times her revolts had quickly succeeded France's. In 1789 and 1830 she had followed the bad example of the "great disturber of the peace." Few understood, or took the trouble to understand, the conservative and religious character of those Belgian risings. The mere fact that when Paris spoke Brussels answered, was sufficient. So that when the thunder was heard once more all Courts of Europe expected the inevitable echo and were greatly surprised not to hear it. As week succeeded week and the trouble spread to their own lands, the idea began to dawn for the first time upon these Princes that the Belgians were not so hostile to monarchy as they seemed to be, and that Leopold's moderation and constitutional methods might not have been inspired only by weakness or fear. The reaction was immediate. From being Europe's outcasts, Belgium became her model. As for Leopold, he soared from the lowest to the first rank of the Royal hierarchy. The silence of the Brussels streets had converted the world.

After the affair of Risquons-Tout had cleared the air, Leopold was mostly occupied in collecting the laurel wreaths which reached him from every side.

"Our nationality," writes van de Weyer from London, "is no longer considered as an artificial theory resting merely

on diplomatic documents, but as a reality founded on the unshakable will of a people who understand and fulfil their obligations towards others and towards themselves. All prejudices which existed against us have disappeared. Within six weeks we have converted more sceptics and enlisted more defenders of our independence than we could have obtained by half a century of peaceful life."* Queen Victoria confirmed this message a few days later. "Truly proud and delighted are we at the conduct of the Belgians, and at their loyalty and affection for you and yours, which I am sure must be a reward for all that you have done these seventeen years . . . You are held up as a pattern to the German Sovereigns, and the Belgians as a pattern to the German people."

In Prussia, Belgian institutions are praised everywhere. The project is even mooted in Frankfurt to offer Leopold the crown of Germany which would become, with Belgium, under his wise leadership, a pan-German, constitutional Confederation. The Austrian Minister in Brussels writes that "Belgium has acquired lately a very great moral importance by resisting the dangerous influences which threatened her nationality, and has become for other constitutional countries in Europe a fruitful source of instruction." For the first time, Russia is shaken. "In the midst of a crisis which threatened social order," writes Nesselrode, "Belgium has shown herself worthy of the admiration of Europe."

More strange still, considering the recent conduct of some of her leaders, France joins in this concert of praise. Her representative in Brussels declares in his despatches to Paris, at the end of March, that "Belgium enjoys all the liberties of a republic for the conquest of which France rose on February 24th . . . The Belgian people follow the great

* de Ridder: *La Crise de la Neutralité belge en 1848.*

spectacle of the French revolution with admiration but without enthusiasm . . . Proud of having preceded us in the pacific conquest of the liberties they enjoy . . . they do not envy their neighbours and believe that they should rather be models than condescend to become imitators."

A supreme satisfaction was left to Leopold when, in September 1849, Metternich, who had sought refuge in England, asked him to be allowed to come to Belgium, "the most peaceful country on the Continent." "Your Majesty's wisdom," wrote the veteran diplomat, "has preserved your country from the evils of a dangerous agitation." Leopold was the last man to glory in his triumph or even to remind the Prince of his former errors. He answered that he was "deeply touched" by the "proof of confidence" which Metternich had given him, and expressed the hope that he would enjoy his sojourn in Belgium. "I am convinced," he added, not without a touch of malice, "that everything will be done here to show as much kindness towards you as you have always shown towards this country. We go on giving a good example and I cannot help thinking that it will make a good impression in neighbouring lands." Metternich was cordially received at Court and after meeting the King's ministers, expressed his astonishment not to find among them any *songe-creux*. He congratulated the Sovereign on having succeeded in "creating order out of disorder." Leopold refrained from mentioning their correspondence on the subject and applied himself to improving such golden opinions by showing his guest everything which might impress him favourably. As a gentleman he spared the feelings of his old adversary, as a diplomat he thought that the fallen statesman might still, one day, be helpful to him.

The King was far too intelligent to be blinded by his success. He realized that some of the compliments showered upon him were inspired by selfish motives rather than by

sincere sympathy, and that part of this enthusiasm was simply due to the fact that, for the present, Belgium exerted a moderating influence in Europe. Neither did he forget that the fall of Louis-Philippe, to whom he had offered hospitality at Claremont, was a cruel blow to his House and weakened his personal position in Europe. The effect of the Paris revolution might ultimately be to strengthen both France and Germany and bring about a rivalry from which Belgium would be the first to suffer.

The Keystone, no doubt, was shining and everybody praised its radiance, but the future remained dark and uncertain and did not justify self-congratulations.

CHAPTER VI

THE NESTOR OF EUROPE

I

INSTEAD of facilitating the task of government, the reform of 1848, which increased the electorate from 55,000 to 80,000, had made it more difficult. The majority of the new electors belonged to the industrial towns and these additional Liberal votes upset the balance of parties which had previously favoured Unionism and moderation.

Although Rogier retained the Premiership, a new leader exerted a powerful influence on the Liberal party. As Finance Minister, Frère-Orban, a disciple of Bastiat and J.-B. Say, gave a strong impulse to Free Trade, which appeared more and more as the economic expression of Liberalism. In 1849 he abolished export taxes, and reduced the cost of transit; one year later he decreed the free entry of corn; in 1860 he brought about the suppression of the tolls which hampered internal circulation. Convinced that a highly industrialized country like Belgium could only compete with other countries if the cost of production remained low and credit easy, he applied himself to strengthening the financial position of the State by the creation of a National Bank, in 1850. When, through the initiative of Napoleon III, the policy of Free Trade was adopted in Western Europe, Belgium was thus fully equipped to reap the advantage of the reform, and concluded new

commercial treaties with England, the Zollverein, Spain and Italy. At last, in 1863, the Government succeeded in buying from Holland the taxes on the Scheldt traffic imposed by the 1839 treaty. Antwerp became once more, as it had been in the sixteenth century, a port open to all nations, and Belgium resumed the position which she had lost during the last two hundred years, in the forefront of European trade.

The Liberals did not, unfortunately, show the same far-sightedness in social and religious questions. The axiom that liberty gave economically a fair chance to all was more and more interpreted to the advantage of the bourgeoisie and particularly of the industrialists, and the conflict between Church and State education grew more acute. The King was again faced with the difficulty of bridging the gap which threatened to divide the nation, at a time when the international situation required that political union should be maintained.

The fall of the Rogier Cabinet, in 1852, coincided with the Bonapartist success in France. Anxious to strengthen the country's defences, Leopold called to power a moderate Liberal, his ex-War Minister de Brouckère, who had enlisted the collaboration of colleagues from outside Parliament. The King hoped, in this way, to calm political passions and to alter the military law. He succeeded in raising the army's effectives from 80,000 to 100,000, but failed to maintain de Brouckère in office after 1855.

His successor, de Decker, was a moderate Catholic, and a convinced champion of Unionism. He had published a pamphlet, a few months before, in which he upheld the idea that Belgian politics should not rest on the victory of one party over the other but on a wise transaction between the two. "To excite party spirit," he wrote, "and aim at an exclusive domination, is to provoke the gravest danger which threatens our institutions." The strife of parties might

ruin the power of the Sovereign, "who finds himself crushed by their successive assaults and humiliated by their victories. The Government proclaims some definite principle which is denied, the next day, by the Opposition." Such a regime is "a treason" and favours foreign ambitions. What does it matter who wields the power, provided it is used for the benefit of the community and "guarantees to all citizens, without distinction, the enjoyment of constitutional liberties? . . . Liberals, you are not the whole country; Catholics, you are not the whole country; you have no right to legislate alone in the name of the country!"*

These views were the same as those which Leopold expressed again and again in his correspondence. The de Decker ministry, including two Liberal ministers, was a "Cabinet according to his heart." In face of the dangerous international situation created by the rising power of Napoleon III, it seemed urgent that Belgium should be spared another crisis. In his eagerness to defend this last Unionist experiment, and to oppose the exclusive rule of the majority which hampered his influence, the Sovereign seems to have lost for the first time the calm and untiring patience which he had previously shown on similar occasions.

2

The cause of the political crisis of 1857 must appear a trivial one to those who do not realize the prejudices which existed at the time on the Continent against the religious foundations of the Old Régime and the privileges of *main-morte*. Under a free Constitution, every citizen should have the right to make a legacy in favour of any institution, whatever its character. "The two countries where the constitu-

* Quoted by Lichtervelde, *Léopold I*, 269.

tional régime is most successfully practised," wrote Leopold in 1849, "England and the United States, place no obstacle to the donations and charities made by private individuals." He forgot that he was neither in England nor in America, but in a country still strongly influenced by anti-clerical prejudices engendered by old abuses.

As soon as the Cabinet attempted to modify the rules introduced by the previous Liberal Government concerning the matter, and to recognize religious donations, the Opposition rose up in arms against the new measure, known as *la Loi des Couvents*. Riots occurred in the provinces and a convent was plundered at Jemappes. On May 27th, while Parliament was discussing the bill, violent demonstrations occurred in Brussels. Leopold was indignant. He spoke of proclaiming a state of siege, of calling out the troops and "riding himself at their head to suppress the disturbances and protect the deputies against the attacks of the mob." He wished to call to the Palace the leaders of the Opposition and to exact from them a promise to respect the Constitution. This pressure from the street would be, he declared, "the death of the parliamentary system."*

Whether his resolution was right or wrong, Leopold was prevented from carrying it into effect by the attitude of his ministers, who preferred to withdraw the bill rather than to challenge a division, but he published in the official gazette, the *Moniteur*, on June 14th, a long letter in which he justified his attitude. This public letter, which Stockmar considered as "somewhat irregular," is the first of the kind written by a Belgian Sovereign. The precedent thus created was followed by Leopold's successors on a number of occasions, and proved invaluable as a corrective to the abuses of the party spirit and party government. Although nominally addressed to the Prime Minister, these Royal messages are

* Müller, *La Querelle des Fondations charitables*.

really destined for the whole nation; through them the King may express his personal opinion on certain matters with more freedom than through any other means.

"The free institutions of Belgium," wrote Leopold, "have been practised for twenty-six years with an admirable rectitude . . . I am convinced that Belgium can go on living happy and respected, following the road of moderation, but I am also convinced that any measure which can be interpreted as tending to impose the supremacy of one opinion upon the other is a danger. We do not lack freedom and our Constitution, wisely and carefully applied, maintains a happy balance." Writing to Thiers, on June 18th, he explains that his aim was to maintain his Ministry in power and to place the responsibility of the disturbances on the Opposition. New elections would soon take place—they were due in 1858—and public opinion would no doubt react against extremists.

The 1857 crisis is the first in which public agitation had influenced the attitude of the Government since 1831. The King's hostility to the rigid application of the party system did not only result from his "moderation" but from the fundamental belief that under such a system the interests of the minority would inevitably be sacrificed. As Sovereign he considered it his duty to govern in the name of the whole nation, not of the faction which happened to be in power at the time. His efforts to preserve to the last some form of Unionism are particularly interesting to study in the light of post-War politics in constitutional countries, which tend to substitute a "coalition" or "national" régime to the party régime favoured in pre-War days.

3

Contrary to Leopold's expectations, the 1858 elections marked a new progress on the Liberal side, and he was finally compelled to accept de Decker's resignation and to call again upon Rogier, who remained in power until the end of his reign.

Henceforth the King seemed to lose a great deal of interest in internal affairs and to turn his attention more and more towards foreign relations and defensive measures. In these questions he could still collaborate with his ministers, while he was instinctively opposed to the party measures they adopted in public education and administrative matters. He always regretted the lack of energy shown by his Government in 1857 and deplored the bitter strife between rival factions which followed its fall. In de Lichtervelde's words, "under a Unionist rule he was able to guide, under party rule he could only put on the brake."

He did so with remarkable energy on several occasions by using all his influence to prevent Rogier from abusing his power against the Catholics and the clergy. When he strongly disapproved of certain measures, he postponed his ratification and absented himself at the critical moment. The Prime Minister was obliged to pursue him as far as Geneva and Marseilles in order to extract his signature. Another minister complained that the King made "his life impossible": "He questions every one of my decisions and I am now compelled to offer him a decree with one hand and my resignation with the other." Leopold objected that the members of his Cabinet had not kept their promise. "If I refuse to sign this bill," he writes to van Praet, "they will again say that I favour the Catholics, and I am a Protestant. In 1857 Rogier promised me to be conciliatory . . . has he

been so?" Van Praet acts more and more as an intermediary between the Cabinet and the Sovereign. The latter no longer presides over the weekly meetings of the Council at the Palace. Relations have become strained and the cruel illness which afflicts the King during the three last years of his reign does not improve them.

4

No doubt Leopold would not have resigned himself so easily to the idea that party government had come to stay if the international situation had not absorbed his attention.

His triumph of 1848 was short-lived. The world revolution was followed on the Continent by a reaction which furthered national ambitions in every country and increased the danger of war. Having been a witness of the long struggle against Napoleon I and of its reactions in Western Europe, the King was convinced that another general war might endanger the foundations of social order. He was also aware of the difficulty of limiting the theatre of operations and used to quote Wellington's words: "You cannot have a little war." In the loose European system which followed the London Conference of 1830 it had been possible to prevent a conflagration, as he had done in 1840, by using his influence in London and Paris and his personal relations in Austria. Germany was still deeply divided, France was a constitutional kingdom, Louis-Philippe a peace-loving monarch. Would it still be possible in the near future?

A new and particularly dangerous star had risen over the political horizon. Leopold remembered Louis Napoleon as a boy, whom he had met when visiting Queen Hortense, and, many years later, as an impecunious young man living

in exile in London. He appreciated his intelligence and entertained no illusion concerning the temporary character of his victory. He understood at once that, though exaggerated, the alarms caused in Brussels by the *coup d'état* were partly justified. Annexation was not imminent but it was "in the air." It was consistent with the attitude of the French Press and with the personality of the new master whom France had given herself. While Napoleon's power was increasing by leaps and bounds, from the Presidency to the proclamation of the Empire, soon followed by the confiscation of the fortune of the Orléans family, Leopold did not remain idle. He realized that an autocratic centralized national régime must necessarily foster an annexationist policy and that, even if Napoleon's pacific protestations were sincere, he would be driven to war in order to flatter public passion and uphold the glory of his name. Belgian neutrality must be strengthened and confirmed before it was too late.

While avoiding anything which might hurt the Emperor's susceptibilities, the King sought support among the other Powers. He knew that he could find it in England, this time not only with the Queen but also with Lord John Russell, who would whole-heartedly uphold the principle of Belgian neutrality and oppose French ambitions. "A military government in France," Leopold writes to Queen Victoria a few days after the *coup d'état*, "if it really gets established must become dangerous for Europe. I hope that at least at its beginning it will have enough to do in France, and that we may get time to prepare. England will do well not to fall asleep but to keep up its old energy and courage."

With Austria the King had entertained the most friendly relations since 1848. He was now negotiating the marriage of his son, the Duke of Brabant, with the Archduchess Marie-Henriette, celebrated in 1853, which realized his

dream of a union of his House with the Hapsburg dynasty. Confiding in Schwarzenberg, in February 1852, he spoke of a plan for "a close union between the continental Powers, not for aggression but against aggression." Russia had altered her unfriendly attitude and sent a representative to Brussels. Prussia alone remained a dark horse. Frederick William could not forgive Leopold the popularity he had enjoyed at Frankfurt and was aware of his opposition to the pan-German plan of unification. Prussia would no doubt resist an attack against the Vienna system, unless she came to an agreement with France which might jeopardize the existence of Belgium.

Always with the idea of securing his frontiers and strengthening his position, Leopold hastened to further friendly relations with Holland. The events of 1848 had led both countries to consider measures of common defence. A similar situation might bring about the same result, since the existence of Belgium had now become a condition of Dutch security. The King kept up a confidential correspondence with his old enemy and received him with great pomp in Liège in 1861. He sympathized with William II on this occasion, pointing out to Queen Victoria that it is "somewhat embarrassing" to be received as a guest in a country in which one used to be heir to the throne.

Leopold's diplomacy during these years has been severely denounced by some French writers, who describe him as an arch-plotter conspiring secretly to form a coalition against Napoleon and to revive the old hatreds against the Empire. These critics seem to forget that, in spite of the recent increase of the Belgian army, the King had only 100,000 men to oppose to the invader, and that the attitude of the Government-controlled French Press and of the French Foreign Office gave him ample cause to fear his neighbour's ambition. His policy was neither anti-French nor even

anti-Bonapartist; it was simply inspired by the interests of the country he had undertaken to protect. To be told by the Emperor that Belgian neutrality meant for him a "close union" between France and Belgium was small comfort to Leopold, who felt his powerful neighbour's cordial protestations to be almost as dangerous as his outbursts of anger. He did not return deliberately to the old grouping of the Powers but was compelled, by circumstances over which he had no control, to seek security where he could find it. That his apprehensions were not the result of Orleanist prejudice or personal antagonism was amply proved by later events.

5

The first difficulties arose over attacks against the new French régime which appeared in the Belgian Press. Such attacks would have occurred under normal conditions in a constitutional country instinctively hostile to the abuse of power. They were embittered by the fact that a number of Republicans and Orleanists had sought refuge or a voluntary exile in Brussels, among them Thiers, Paul Deschanel, Proudhon and Victor Hugo. Although the most violent of the articles were published in unimportant papers, they caused the greatest irritation in Paris. Protests were made even before the proclamation of the Empire. When, in deference to these protests, certain writers were prosecuted, their acquittal by a democratic jury appeared nothing short of "scandalous" to a Government which had more efficient means of limiting the freedom of the Press. The publication of Hugo's *Napoléon le Petit*, in July 1852, provoked another diplomatic incident, and an unfortunate teacher who had read a few extracts from the poem to his class, in a provincial town, had to be dismissed. The conflict was more deep-

seated than appears at first. The Emperor's interference aimed at nothing less than altering the Belgian Constitution under threat of reprisals. Unable or unwilling to realize that Rogier had no legal means of preventing these attacks, he accused him of being deliberately hostile, because he feared that the example of France would be followed by Belgium, and that he would lose the sympathies of a "population disillusioned as to the so-called virtues of the parliamentary régime." Though such accusations seem strangely familiar to modern ears, it must be remembered that, in this case, Belgium was singled out, and that Napoleon spared more powerful or distant nations the angry protests he showered on his weak neighbour.

The de Brouckère Government thought it wise, in 1852, to legislate against journalists who attacked foreign Sovereigns, but the King and his minister did not for a moment contemplate the suggested revision of the Constitution. In a note addressed to London, de Brouckère explained that free discussion was an essential part of Belgian life and intimately bound up with its independence. "If Belgium were to be deprived of this régime," he wrote, "the young State would lose its vigour, its self-reliance, its moral life . . . A 'materialized' Belgium would soon become a French Belgium."

The Anglo-French entente of 1854, before the Crimean War, brought about a temporary lull. In January, Prince Jérôme-Napoléon was received in Brussels and in September the King paid a visit to the Emperor at Calais. In February 1856 the Cabinet introduced a bill for the extradition of all persons implicated in an attempt against the life of a foreign Sovereign. These courtesies and precautions proved equally fruitless. Emboldened by his victory in the East, Napoleon decided to strike hard and took the opportunity of the Peace Congress in Paris to urge the Powers, through his minister

Walewski, to compel the Belgians to alter their attitude. He wished to crush this "horrible sore, this venomous serpent which is called the Belgian Press." This violent outburst provoked an equally violent reaction in Brussels, where the minister Vilain XIV opposed a resonant "no" to Walewski's challenge. The British Government supported the Belgian attitude and the Conservative Powers, although ill-disposed towards constitutional liberties, were unwilling to help Napoleon in the pursuit of a policy which could only lead to war, since Belgium remained firm.

In spite of his distrust of Napoleon, Leopold never did anything to undermine the Anglo-French alliance. He deplored the conflict with Russia, which he believed might have been solved without bloodshed, but never questioned the necessity of maintaining good relations with the two Powers on which the existence of Belgium most depended. This axiom of policy was as true after 1852 as before, and no change in the French régime could alter it. Besides, as long as Napoleon depended on the English alliance, he would never attempt to interfere in Belgium. "I hold a position of great geographical importance for England . . ." the King writes to his niece in January, 1854. "The only influence I may exercise is to prevent mischief where I can . . . The foolish accusation that we are doing all we can to break up the French alliance is certainly the most absurd of all; if anything can be for our local advantage, it is to see England and France closely allied, and for a long period—for ever, I should say."

6

The long duel between the King of the Belgians and the French Emperor was resumed as soon as the allies parted

company after the Crimean War. The contrast between the two adversaries is one of the most striking in modern history. Leopold was a traditionalist working for peace and the maintenance of the *status quo*, a keen realist distrusting adventures and ideology. Napoleon was, by nature or necessity, a restless schemer, trying vainly to reconcile his appetite for conquest with a vague dream of universal brotherhood—in which France played the part of the eldest brother—and endeavouring to provide sufficient excitement to public opinion to maintain his hold on his people. The first could only rely on his small army and on the support he might find abroad, the second wielded a power which was considered as unrivalled in Europe. The one believed in a grouping of nations founded on common traditions in which independence could only be preserved by the Balance of Power, the other in a rigid nationalism based on race and language. Their policies clashed in Russia, in Italy, in Austria, but most of all in Belgium, the first country to be sacrificed on the altar of the modern Utopia.

Leopold had certainly won the first bout. The only result of Walewski's outburst at the Peace Congress of 1856 had been to compel him to a diplomatic retreat, and to strengthen the patriotism of the Belgians who rallied round their King, a few months later, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his accession. This was Leopold's national triumph, as 1848 had been his greatest international success. Once more he rode from Laeken to the Place Royale, where from the steps of the Church of Saint Jacques the President of the Congress, de Gerlache, surrounded by the surviving members of the first Belgian national assembly, reminded him of his constitutional oath: "The men who were the witnesses of this solemn engagement have come here to declare, before God, that Your Majesty has fulfilled all his promises beyond our hopes. The whole nation testifies

with us that during this reign of twenty-five years her King has never violated a single law, infringed a single liberty or given cause for a single legitimate complaint . . . The people wish to express their gratitude to him who, after God, has most contributed to their happiness."

The Sovereign and his children were greeted with the same enthusiasm in the principal towns of the nine provinces. Better than his official speeches, his private correspondence reveals Leopold's genuine pleasure. He felt "like a father among his children," and agreed that it was comforting to receive such testimonies of gratitude after a long reign." He hoped to remain for some time his people's pilot, "for the future was dark with clouds."

Back in Coburg, old Stockmar records with satisfaction the success of "the Belgian experiment": "I do not remember having seen or heard anywhere such a triumph. The reward has been laboriously and painfully obtained; it was loyally and conscientiously deserved. If there is a part of the crop which the reaper has not yet gathered, it will undoubtedly ripen later for his country and his family."

7

The future, nevertheless, was "dark with clouds," the first of which burst on the morrow of the unsuccessful attempt made by Orsini on the Emperor's life, in January 1858. Following the publication of certain articles in Brussels, Walewski suggested that the Emperor should use his army to compel the Belgian Government to defend him "against his enemies." In order to give some satisfaction to Paris, a number of journalists were prosecuted and more foreigners expelled, but the Constitution remained unaltered and the tension was scarcely relieved.

Leopold was more and more anxious to strengthen the defence of the country. The recent increase in the army was not sufficient. It was urgent that the invader should be delayed long enough by the national forces to give time to the other Powers to fulfil their obligations as guarantors of Belgian neutrality. They should never be faced by a *fait accompli*, following a rapid conquest. Such a situation might lead to disaster owing to the strength of the French army and of the French fleet, which was only slightly inferior to the British in those days. The best plan seemed to be to complete the defences of Antwerp, begun in 1852 with the idea that the port should be accessible in war-time to English ships. After a first failure, Rogier, strongly supported by the King, succeeded in persuading Parliament to adopt, in 1859, the project prepared by General Brialmont of a vast entrenched camp, in which the whole army might find shelter, in case of need, and "prolong resistance indefinitely."

Meanwhile Napoleon had embarked on another adventure and succeeded in defeating Austria in Italy. After the signature of the treaty of Villafranca, in July 1859, the King urged his ministers not to relax their efforts: "I need not tell you that this arrangement, far from diminishing the danger which threatens us, increases it in a frightening way . . . A little time is left us. Let us use it in fortifying both Antwerp and our national existence."

He had as little sympathy for Italian unity as for German unity. The growth of these new ambitious States was, according to him, far more dangerous to European peace and Belgian independence than the preservation of the old Empires, particularly Austria, which he considered indispensable for the maintenance of the Balance of Power. Distressed at the news of Magenta and Solferino, he suggested that Prussia should concentrate her troops on the Rhine in

order to compel Napoleon to bring hostilities to an end.* This advice was diametrically opposed to that given by Bismarck, who urged his country to keep out of the struggle and to do nothing to save Austria's possessions. The appearance of Bismarck on the world's stage completes the trio; from now onwards Leopold will stand between the two nationalist leaders who, in very different ways, pursued the greatness of their countries at the expense of Austria and the smaller European States.

The King was nearly seventy. He seemed to have worked harder than ever during these last years of his life in order to ensure Belgium against the risks of a future war. He enlists the advice of Todleben, the defender of Sebastopol, and chooses General Chazal as Minister for War in order to stimulate the zeal of his Cabinet. The French Press is worse than ever. The King is described as the "sentry of the Holy Alliance" and the "temporary Sovereign of an artificial country, of a faked nation." It is proposed to convert the Lion which surmounts the monument at Waterloo into "a victorious eagle hovering over the French plain of Mont-Saint-Jean." The Walloons are described as yearning to return to their "mother country," and the Flemings as groaning under the yoke of Belgian authority and wishing to place themselves under the "benevolent and fair rule" of the Emperor. The annexation of Nice and Savoy, in March 1860, gave point to these remarks.

The situation was all the more alarming because, owing to the commercial treaty of May 1861, Belgium was more and more drawn into the economic orbit of France. Free Trade was too favourable to Belgian interests to be resisted. French bimetallism was adopted, the same year, and in December 1865 Belgium became a member of the Latin Monetary Union.

* Corti: *Leopold I*, p. 267.

During the summer of 1862 the King suffered from a severe attack of stone and only narrowly escaped death. His recovery was greeted in Brussels with joyful demonstrations, but it was only temporary and, from that time on, he was subject to constant illness.

In the autumn he received a deputation from Antwerp, where the defence works which were at last pushed on with great activity caused serious opposition. He impressed upon the delegates the necessity of subordinating local to national interests. "The main object of national policy," he declared on that occasion, "must be to maintain the country's neutrality, but this policy can only inspire confidence among all our neighbours if they are convinced that Belgium is sufficiently strong to fulfil the obligations imposed upon her by her political existence."

Better than his subjects, the King saw the danger drawing closer. Prussia had been allowed to invade and occupy Schleswig-Holstein and was evidently preparing to wrench from Austria the hegemony of the German Confederation. There were clouds in the South and more clouds in the North. In 1861 Leopold had written to Thiers deploring the constant crises which were endangering European peace. "If counsels of moderation did not prevail," he added, "we might have conflicts of nation against nation, particularly dangerous because tainted with fanaticism."

After suffering a humiliating defeat at the hands of Napoleon, Austria was now faced by a much more formidable enemy. What attitude would the Emperor adopt before this new conflict? Would he oppose Prussia or exact "compensations"? In November 1864 the rumour spread in Paris and Brussels that Bismarck had offered the annexation of Belgium as the price of French collaboration. The situation remained so alarming that when Leopold died, one year later, the *Times* suggested that the country might not survive her King.

8

Although the diplomatic talent and wise statesmanship of the "Nestor of Europe," as he was frequently called in those days, have never been questioned, it has been pointed out that he did not modify his views in his old age and was unable to adapt himself to the new circumstances which confronted him.

That he did not realize the responsibility of the State for the social conditions of the labouring classes has already been mentioned. This mistake was shared by most statesmen of his time. The King was, however, sufficiently clear-sighted to warn absolute rulers against the danger of challenging public opinion, and he stood as a model to all in the art of "guiding, advising and warning," which should be the main task of a constitutional Sovereign. Being by instinct a conservative, he exaggerated perhaps the danger for Belgium in adopting drastic reforms. He had been for many years taxed with condoning revolution, and wished to show that a liberal régime could be as stable and even more stable than the most autocratic monarchy. Safety lay for him in the elasticity of constitutionalism, but he had no desire to force the pace and to launch his weak and exposed kingdom into dangerous adventures.

The same moderate method was applied to his diplomatic activities. It is not quite correct to say that he misjudged Cavour and overestimated the power of Austria. Rightly or wrongly, he distrusted the development of new Powers which were likely to upset the Balance of Europe, and the doctrine of nationalism based on race and language which might lead the world to greater confusion. Next to the personal rule of an unreliable dictator, such as Napoleon III, he dreaded the formation of a rigid system of centralized

States which would embitter national rivalries and lead to political "fanaticism."

Some of his warnings, read to-day, assume almost a prophetic character. As early as 1849 he spoke to Archduke John, with whom he entertained a regular correspondence, of the dangers which menaced Austria. Far from stirring hostility against the rising power in the North, he advised Vienna to "facilitate the task of Prussia, which is not easy owing to her poverty and to the ambitious character of her people." But he added that if Austria withdrew her influence from Germany she would "commit suicide." Left alone, "her nine millions of German subjects could not resist the pressure of the other nationalities within the frontiers of the monarchy." Austria must be preserved at all costs, for she is the foundation, the corner-stone of European politics.

To self-determination, as understood in those days, he opposed historical tradition, which, by combining a variety of people within the same frontiers, put a brake on territorial annexationism and prevented political rivalries from degenerating into racial feuds. His respect for Austria is not difficult to understand. Besides being a great centre of culture, Austria was powerful without being dangerous, and too preoccupied by internal difficulties to seek expansion abroad; she was the only big continental Power with which a small nation like Belgium could enter into close relations without running the risk of being absorbed. National variety was a guarantee of peace; national homogeneity was a danger of war. The King did not foresee that under German military influence the old monarchy might one day lose this conservative and pacific character and become one of the agents of disruption in 1914, but he would certainly have foreseen that its break-up, engineered at Versailles, would soon lead to its complete disappearance from the map

and to the dangerous complications such disappearance implied.

One of Leopold's chief weaknesses, fostered by his eighteenth-century education, was his fondness for diplomatic marriages. Corti draws a list of no less than fifteen unions contracted through his influence from 1816 to 1864. Some of these matrimonial combinations, such as that of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, were a source of happiness, but the majority led to domestic trouble or even political disaster.

The gravest mistake of his long career was, perhaps, the way in which he encouraged the ambition of his favourite daughter Charlotte, whom he had married, in 1857, to Archduke Ferdinand Max of Austria. Napoleon bears, no doubt, a share of responsibility in the Mexican adventure of which Leopold did not fortunately witness the tragic end. But it seems incredible that the wise and moderate King, who had so often volunteered advice to unwilling foreign Princes who were nothing to him, should have been blind to the terrible risks incurred in the Mexican military expedition and the forcible installation of Maximilian's rule over an unwilling people.

The death of the Prince Consort, in 1861, had brought uncle and niece much nearer to each other. Never had their relationship been closer since Queen Victoria's marriage. She turns towards her old protector like a wounded child to its father and, in answer to her appeal, he finds the only words which can bring her some comfort and give her the energy to resume her political duties. In spite of his failing health, the King came to Osborne in December and spent several weeks in England condoling with his niece and endeavouring at the same time to rekindle her interest in public affairs. There is no trace of cynicism in the correspondence nor in the tribute paid to his nephew: "What a master spirit had in view for the welfare and

happiness of millions goes beyond earthly success . . .”

The next year, after Leopold's serious illness, the Queen came to visit him in Laeken, where Princess Alexandra of Denmark had also been invited. The plan of a marriage between her and the Prince of Wales had been suggested by the King, no doubt because the Princess seemed, from every point of view, a very suitable bride, but also because a union between Denmark and England might check Prussian ambitions in the North. After Queen Victoria's departure for Coburg, where she wished to see old Stockmar, "Bertie" arrived at Laeken, and a few days later Leopold was able to announce the news of the engagement to his niece.

Seven years previously, he had also been consulted concerning the prospective marriage of Princess Victoria, the Queen's eldest daughter, with Prince Frederick William of Prussia. He had entirely approved the project, which seemed most suitable to Belgian interests, since it established indirect family relations between Prussia and Belgium. The prospect of an English Princess becoming the Queen of the young rising State appeared as a guarantee against annexation from the North, as his own marriage with Louise-Marie d'Orléans had been a guarantee against annexation from the South. The very reason which procured Leopold's support of the plan may have provoked Bismarck's opposition to it.

During the last months of his life the old King received a number of visitors: several Coburg Princes, once more Queen Victoria, the King of Portugal and, finally, the Crown Prince and Princess of Prussia with their small, delicate boy. Everything had become an effort and the Royal letters grow shorter and shorter, ending now frequently with a parting "God bless you!" as if every message might be the last. Knowing, however, his niece's affection for the frail little William, Leopold gave her a short account of the visit, adding: "I like the boy." It seems strange that one of the

last smiles of the sick and stern old monarch should have been given to the future King-Emperor who, as William II, ravaged his land, and almost succeeded in ruining his life's work.

9

The last three years were years of physical suffering stoically endured. In March 1863 Leopold wrote: "I have now been thirteen months suffering the most atrocious pain." He stayed more and more at Laeken, but came to Brussels for his audiences when able to do so. A Belgian diplomat, Baron Beyens, has left a portrait of him in these days which shows that, in spite of the ravages of age, the King had lost nothing of his prestige. "Of the fine face and perfect profile I had known," he writes, "there remained only the sharp outlines and a parchment-like mask intersected with wrinkles. His black, shiny wig was covered by a top hat, which he only touched with his gloved hand in answer to the cheers of the crowd. He was greeted with extraordinary respect, such as I have never noticed on the passage of any Sovereign, even the old Austrian Emperor. It was as if every citizen in Brussels, without distinction of class, realized what he owed to this impressive septuagenarian, whose eyes only seemed to be alive."

When suffering became too acute, he shut himself in his rooms and only communicated with his household, even with his children, by writing. He succeeded, nevertheless, in carrying on his work. His reputation had spread to America and, in 1863, he was invited to arbitrate in a dispute between England and Brazil. His award was given in favour of the latter and he seized this opportunity to negotiate another Coburg marriage, that of his nephew August with the

daughter of Pedro II. The state of his health did not allow him, however, to accept, a few months later, the proposal to arbitrate between Spain and the United States.

During a few weeks of respite, in 1864, he went to Italy, to Switzerland and to France, where he met Napoleon, for the last time, at Vichy. In the spring of 1865 he felt much worse. "I cannot leave my solitude," he writes to Chazal; "I am still sick and God knows how long it will last. *C'est une complète démolition.*" In November he wished to see again his castle of Ardenne and the wild hills among which he had enjoyed so many holidays. Feeling his end near he had soon to return to Laeken.

It came as a relief on December 10th. The Duchess of Brabant was at his death-bed and received his confession before the arrival of the Protestant chaplain. Leopold's last words were spoken in German and he died in the religion of his fathers, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. His hand remained to the end in the hand of the future Queen.*

10

He had lived a full life and done great work. If he reviewed his career during these last days, he must have thought of Coburg, the home of his ambitious projects, and of Claremont, the home of his love, and perhaps also of Greece. For if he had devoted his work to Belgium, if the best of his energy had been employed in setting fairly the keystone in the vault of European political architecture, Greece remained to the end his dream. Life is full of such contradictions.

He never forgot the offer made to him in 1830. Nine

* Baron Beyens, *Le Second Empire*.

years later, he wrote to Queen Victoria that, although he felt perfectly satisfied with his position in Belgium, the East had still for him an irresistible attraction: "The only political longing I still have in life is for the Orient, where I shall perhaps once end my life, unlike the sun, rising in the West and setting in East" In October 1841, after telling the Queen of his suspicions, regarding the famous plot against the Royal family, he adds abruptly: "I would I could make a *chassez-croisez* with Otho [King of Greece since 1833]; he would be the gainer in solids, and I should have sun and an interesting country" His confidences to Nothomb, in 1856, are still more characteristic. "Considering only the present," he said, "Belgium is certainly better than Greece. I should probably have a less agreeable existence in Greece, but my dynasty would have greater prospects. I should not have lived isolated among the ruins of Athens, without relations with the Sovereigns and statesmen in the West. I should have accustomed them to use and consult me and I could have benefited from every opportunity."* There is almost a Byronic touch in this romantic yearning for a milder climate and a more adventurous career. "Belgium," he said once; "is only prose, Greece would have satisfied the poetical aspirations of my soul (*les besoins poétiques de mon âme*)."

We already detect in these words the need for an escape from the "trade of government" which manifests itself so strongly under different forms and expressions in Leopold's successors. It is a Coburg trait and seems inseparable from the tireless energy and scrupulous sense of duty characteristic of a dynasty in which practical reason never succeeded in stifling imagination. Every great man feels that besides the task he has been led to do and which he is compelled to do by a sense of duty, there is somewhere a more congenial

* Baron Nothomb, *Essai sur la Révolution belge*.

work which he might have done better, had circumstances been different. This feeling is often nothing more than an illusion, but are not such illusions necessary if reality is to be fully understood?

CHAPTER VII

LEOPOLD II AND NAPOLEON III

I

THE apprehensions caused by the death of the first King of the Belgians were justified by the international situation. Those, however, who believed that the ship of State would run adrift as soon as its pilot was no longer there to direct its course, underrated the strength of Belgian national life. During the last thirty-four years, old traditions, deeply rooted in the past, had been revived, and new traditions solidly established. Patriotism was no longer a temporary reaction against foreign rule but a permanent belief bound up with the constant practice of constitutional methods. So that, after due homage had been paid to the lost leader, all eyes were immediately turned towards the new Prince on whose shoulders the responsibilities of power had fallen.

The ancient cry: "The King is dead, long live the King!" is not heard in Belgium. The heir to the throne is only entitled to Royal honours after taking the constitutional oath before the assembled Parliament. For a few days the Cabinet remains in sole charge and the country passes through a "republican interval." On December 17th, on the morrow of the old monarch's solemn funeral, the ceremony of 1831 was repeated; but this time the accession, or *inauguration*, as the Belgians call it, took place, not on the Place Royale but in the House of Parliament. In the

presence of the Royal family, the diplomatic corps, the deputies and senators, the new Sovereign took the oath and delivered a speech which was enthusiastically received. A few sentences attracted particular attention: "If I do not promise Belgium a great reign like the one which has established her independence, or a great King like the one whose loss we mourn, I promise her at least a King who is Belgian to the depths of his soul and whose life belongs to her." He was the first "King of the Belgians born in the country." He considered Belgians "as a free, honest and courageous people who had wished for independence, had succeeded in securing it and shown themselves worthy of it, and who would not fail to preserve it." He insisted on his "constitutional mission, which placed him outside party conflicts, which the nation alone was able to solve."

The people rallied round him whole-heartedly and did not spare their cheers when he rode from the House of Parliament to the Royal Palace. The statesmen, however, were still uncertain in their judgement, for they knew very little of the ideas and character of this young Sovereign who, at the age of thirty, was assuming the direction of the country's political life.

2

The Prince's youth had not been happy. When only sixteen he had lost a kind-hearted mother who lavished affection on her children, but had a marked preference for her younger son Philippe and for her daughter Charlotte. Ever since her death he had been subjected to the stern rule of his father, who did not make much effort to understand him. He had been obliged to comply with a rigid time-table which deprived him of the pleasures enjoyed by

other boys of his age. Louise-Marie herself deplored his frail health and ungainly looks. Writing to her mother in Claremont, after the Court ball at which her children had made their first appearance, she points out that while "Philip is growing handsome, Leo is disfigured by his immense nose, which gives him the appearance of a bird." His left leg had always been weak and he had developed a slight limp. If the men were politely interested in some of his remarks, he had little success with the ladies, who were bored by his precocious gravity. "He talks a great deal," wrote Lady Westmorland, a few years later; "if his body remains too young, his mind certainly is not; he speaks already like an old man."

The Duke of Brabant had inherited his father's wilfulness. Aware of being a cause of disappointment to his parents and unable to break the discipline under which he chafed, he sought an outlet in reading. He only showed a mild interest in the curriculum of the Military School which he had to attend, but cultivated the company of older men, especially van Praet, whom he plied with questions about politics, economics and diplomacy. He surrounded himself with books, developed the habit of taking notes and showed an inordinate appetite for facts and statistics. He liked to display his knowledge and to show that he was capable of assuming responsibilities which would have baffled the elegant *cavaliers* with whom he was unfavourably compared. His susceptibility was aroused.

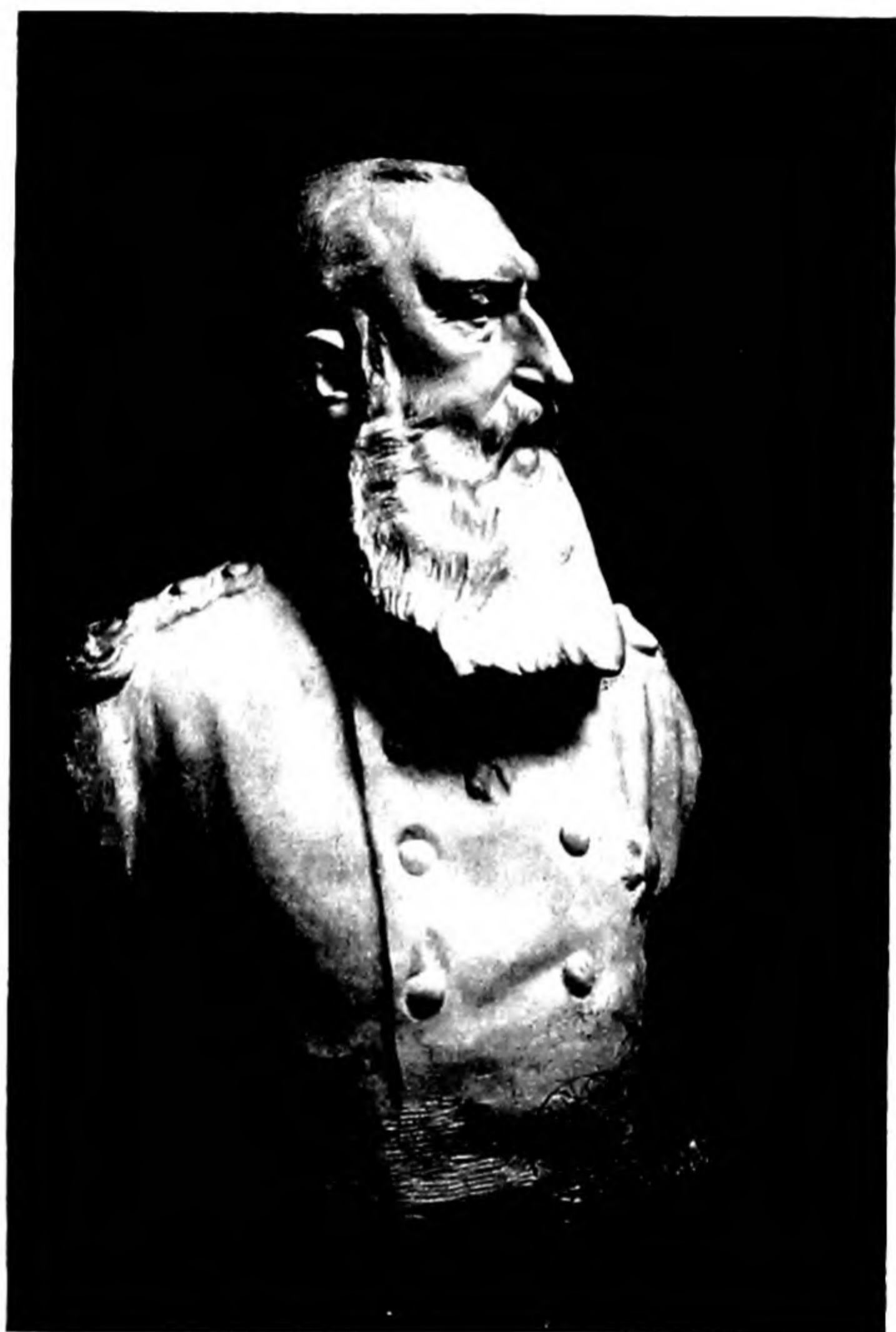
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The Duke's marriage, at the age of eighteen, was only an interlude in the development of his political ideas. It was imposed upon him, as upon the seventeen-year-old Arch-

duchess Marie-Henriette, daughter of Archduke Joseph. This political union, which so much infuriated Napoleon, gratified the Nestor of Europe, but could only be a cause of unhappiness to the bridegroom and the bride. The latter, full of vivacity, fond of horses and open-air life, of dancing and music, soon tired of the company of the serious-minded young man with whom she was supposed to spend her life. It was remarked at the time that "she had been brought up like a boy rather than like a girl," and Princess Metternich, who could not forgive the hospitality which she had received in Brussels after 1848, spoke with a good deal of asperity of "the union of a stable-boy with a nun, it being understood that the Duke was the nun."

The marriage was celebrated by proxy in Vienna on May 18th, 1853, and in Brussels four days later. After paying a short visit to Queen Victoria, the young couple left Brussels in the autumn and travelled for nine months through Egypt, Palestine, Constantinople, Greece and Italy. The Duke did not lose any opportunity of collecting information. Egypt especially attracted him, as did also the dam across the Nile, the projected Suez Canal and the mysterious problem of the great river's source in the remote centre of Africa.

Apart from a few members of the Court, nobody suspected that this honeymoon trip had really been a voyage of studies, and the Belgian senators were not a little surprised when the Duke, who had, according to the Constitution, taken a seat among them, spoke, a few months after his return, on the necessity of developing commercial relations between Antwerp and the East. "The good quality of our products," he pointed out, "and our small cost of production give us the right to claim an important position in the markets of the world . . . Our resources are immense; we can derive considerable profit from them. It is enough to dare in order to succeed!" Strange words in the mouth of a young



BUST OF KING LEOPOLD II BY BARON THOMAS VINÇOTTE

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prince of twenty . . . no doubt the work of an over-zealous secretary. But this speech was followed by others of a more practical character, suggesting that Belgium should send commercial missions abroad, notably to Peking. The Duke also wrote to Rogier and other ministers about his projects of transforming Brussels. He wished to enlarge narrow streets and to create open spaces in popular quarters. His *plantations philanthropiques* appeared to them as unpractical and remote as his schemes for world expansion. People began to consider him as "a dreamer."

A girl named Louise had been born in the Palais Ducal in 1858; the next year, on June 12th, the Belgians rejoiced at the news of the birth of a boy, who was given the title of Comte de Hainaut. The succession seemed assured.

The Duke, nevertheless, remained impatient and restless. Since his father refused to associate him with his political work, he wished to find new fields for his activity. He was already obsessed by the idea that an industrial country like Belgium must find commercial outlets in some undeveloped land. The population had increased from four millions in 1835 to nearly five millions in 1865. "No time should be lost," he urged; "if we delay, all the best positions will be occupied by more enterprising nations." He compared the situation of his country with that of other States, such as Holland, who derived endless resources from their colonies, and he pondered on the necessity of restoring the economic balance which existed in the United Kingdom before the 1830 revolution. His health remained poor and the doctors advised a sojourn in a warmer climate. This provided an excellent pretext for another journey, in March 1860, to Constantinople and Athens. The Duke brought back with him a piece of marble picked up on the Acropolis, which he presented to the Belgian Minister of Finance, bearing the following inscription: "*Souvenir d'Athènes, offert par le duc de*

Brabant à Monsieur Frère-Orban. Il faut à la Belgique une colonie."

After his return, the Prince enlisted the support of a few distinguished men who shared his views, particularly Brialmont, the author of the plans for the fortifications of Antwerp, and Lambermont, general secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The first proved invaluable by stirring public opinion through a series of articles and pamphlets, the second by providing documents which gave to this propaganda a scientific character. The Duke's attention was centred at the time on the Far East. He suggested the foundation of a Company for the establishment of Belgian trading-houses in China, Cochin-China and Japan. He began to gather a collection of books and maps on these countries and wished "to find in history and statistics everything which shows that our opinions are justified and that the arguments of the advocates of a Small Belgium are unfounded." In spite of his declining health, Leopold I persisted in showing no inclination to associate his heir with the trade of government, still less to support his "wild schemes."

More travelling seemed the only activity likely to bear fruit. In the spring of 1862 the Duke visits Spain; in the autumn he goes to Algiers, Tunis, Malta and thence once more to Egypt, where the building of the Suez Canal is in full swing under de Lesseps. In 1864, after a year in Brussels, during which time his second daughter, Stéphanie, is born, he starts for a six months' cruise, always under doctor's orders, to Ceylon, India, Indo-China and China, where he conceives the idea of "developing" Formosa.

On his return, Leopold found his father much worse. The ministers advised a regency, but the old King still refused to yield the reins of power to his son, who, to the very end, was denied any participation in the government of the country.

4

The first contact between the new Sovereign and his Cabinet is described by one of his ministers.* The King succeeded in winning their sympathies by admitting from the first that, having no experience of public affairs, he depended entirely on their loyal support and advice. Frère-Orban was particularly pleased by this modest attitude. Gradually, however, the Sovereign's prestige increased. His ministers admit that "his intentions are excellent; he has talent, tact and judgement; he has seen and learnt a great deal, but he is shrewd (*mais c'est un malin*) . . . As Duke of Brabant the Prince has hidden his qualities and his aspirations; the late King kept him in the dark; the Duke made himself small; he travelled; he was ill. Leopold II climbs to the throne without leaning on his stick; he has discarded it like Pope Sixtus V . . . but far from showing himself proud or arrogant after his accession, he remains mild, modest, insinuating. It is very clever . . . "

What the memorialist did not realize was that the Duke had had no alternative but to efface himself and had never before been given the chance of showing his mettle. Another statement is still more characteristic of the difficulties which the young Sovereign encountered as soon as he wished to assert his influence: "The King discusses very well, very skilfully; he is firm, even stubborn; he is young and eager; he is full of initiative and likes to make a move, but movement is not action. The squirrel also moves in its cage, but it does not progress." One day he was taxed with cunning, the next with an almost childish restlessness.

To such criticism Leopold could only oppose the methods of passive resistance practised by his father. In the first

* Alphonse Vandenpeereboom, *Mémoires*.

years of the reign we already meet the familiar complaint—the King will not return the documents submitted to him for signature; there are undue delays: “Administration becomes impossible if the Sovereign goes on strike.”* These dilatory methods were used, as they had been used before, in order to attenuate as much as possible the party measures taken by the Cabinet. After a period of calm following the accession, the struggle between Catholics and Liberals had been resumed. The latter, reinforced at the 1866 elections, felt more and more inclined to exclude their opponents from official positions. Old Rogier, unable to resist the movement led by Frère-Orban, was finally ousted from the Premiership by his young rival.

The Opposition, however, received some support from an unexpected quarter. During the economic crisis of 1867, strikes had broken out in the mining districts and the army had been called upon to restore order. Several miners had been shot and the Cabinet was accused of upholding ruthlessly the interests of the capitalists. This agitation was linked up with a demand made by the *progressistes*, or radicals, for an extension of the franchise, a demand to which Frère-Orban was fundamentally opposed. More discontent was caused, this time among the Catholics, by the additional military expenses urged by Leopold and rendered urgent by the international situation. In June 1870 the Radicals voted with the Catholics and the King was faced with a political crisis on the eve of the Franco-Prussian war.

5

The lack of understanding which prevailed between the King and his father might have had disastrous consequences

* Quoted by P. Daye, *Leopold II*, p. 181.

for Belgium. Leopold II had some time to acquaint himself with internal questions, since his was only a controlling power, but in foreign affairs he was obliged to take up his predecessor's work, almost at a day's notice, during a troubled period in which the very existence of the country was threatened. Nothing shows better his amazing adaptability than the way in which he succeeded in handling these new problems in spite of the inexperience and the prejudices from which he suffered. The story of Belgian relations with the Powers is scarcely interrupted by the death of the founder of the dynasty. Under his son, national policy remains prudent and firm; Belgium continues her military preparations and seeks support abroad against French ambitions. After 1865, as before that date, the Sovereign insists on the necessity of increasing Belgian defences, tries to avoid causes of friction with his powerful neighbour and remains in close touch with the other guarantors of the country's neutrality. The duel goes on.

The worst feature of the situation in 1866 was that, while the air was full of rumours—which proved later justified—concerning arrangements made between Napoleon and Bismarck with regard to Belgium, the British guarantee which had from the first been the pillar of Belgian independence and neutrality, showed evident signs of decay. In answer to pressing enquiries from Rogier, who wished to know whether Napoleon had been warned that the invasion of Belgium would be made a *casus belli* in London, van de Weyer could only extract from Lord Russell optimistic reassurances regarding French intentions. Queen Victoria, asked by Leopold to interfere, did not succeed in persuading her ministers to commit themselves in any way. Meanwhile the Emperor showed himself more irritated than ever by the attacks in the Belgian Press and by Belgian military preparations. Whatever the result of the conflict between Prussia

and Austria which seemed now unavoidable, Napoleon was bound to claim some "compensation" for his neutrality. His prestige in France depended on an early diplomatic success.

War was declared on June 15th. On July 3rd the Austrian army was completely surrounded at Sadowa. Several British ministers, speaking to their constituents at the time, assured them that the policy of splendid isolation would be maintained. Lord Cowley, British Ambassador in Paris, expressed his personal conviction that "England would not fight for Belgium." Disregarding his ministers' advice Leopold left for London. He knew, like his father, the value of personal contact. He visited the Queen at Windsor, was present at the marriage of Princess Helena, met Gladstone and Disraeli, and returned, on July 8th, more convinced than ever that if Belgium could not put up a stiff resistance she would be abandoned to her fate.

This at least was the impression he wished to convey to the Cabinet. Military preparations should be hastened, the left bank of the Scheldt fortified. Without any positive knowledge of the secret negotiations which were going on at the time in Berlin between the French Ambassador Benedetti and Bismarck, the King felt that the danger of a Franco-Prussian entente would be more serious after Austria's defeat than before. In August he tried to obtain further assurances in Paris through Prince Metternich and Lord Cowley. The latter received from Napoleon an emphatic declaration that there was no question of annexing "an inch of Belgian territory," which he communicated to Brussels. At the same time the happy news spread that, answering Bismarck's suggestion concerning Belgium, Benedetti had answered: "You cannot dispose of a country which does not belong to you."

The facts scarcely justified this eloquent retort. Benedetti

had been instructed to offer Bismarck a public treaty concerning Luxemburg, and a secret treaty of alliance giving France a free hand to annex Belgium and the promise of Prussian armed support if needed. The Chancellor had asked the French Ambassador to prepare a written draft of these proposals, which he had carefully filed for further consideration.* We know from his letters to Bernstorff, Prussian Minister in London, that "he was only interested in Belgium in so far as Belgium interested England," and that he was not prepared to wage war in order to defend her neutrality. But this proof of Napoleon's duplicity might become useful.

Pursuing his *politique des pourboires*, the Emperor further suggested the acquisition of the Grand-Duchy of Luxemburg. Bismarck did not oppose the plan but, after France had come to an agreement with the King of Holland, he stirred up a violent campaign in the German Press. The question was at last referred to an international Conference gathered in London, in which Belgium and Holland were invited to join. The Grand-Duchy was declared neutral under the House of Orange, and remained in the Zollverein. The only concession obtained by Napoleon was the dismantling of the fortress of Luxemburg.

It has often been asked why Belgium did not seize this opportunity of renewing her claim on the province which she had lost in 1839. The Cabinet was divided on this question and instructed the Belgian representative in London not to take any initiative. The attitude of the King seems to have been, for once, undecided. From Paris, where he had been on a short visit, he urged Rogier not to pursue the campaign the latter had started in favour of the return of Luxemburg to the Mother Country. He felt, no doubt, that any inter-

* For the text of this treaty, see Sir E. Hertslet's memorandum in *British Documents on the Origin of the War*, vol. VIII, p. 373.

ference on his part in this affair might spoil his relations with Napoleon, which were at the time almost cordial. The moment was inopportune and the country should seek to preserve her frontiers before trying to extend them.

The memory of these negotiations rankled, however, in the King's mind. Twenty-five years later, he regretted his moderation. "We are too timid," he declared; "it was through fear that, in 1867, we were not able to obtain Luxemburg." Napoleon was no longer there when he made this remark.

The incident was, however, very useful, for, during the debates which took place in the British Parliament, a sharp distinction was made by Lord Derby and Lord Stanley between the old guarantee given to Belgium in 1839 and the new guarantee given to Luxemburg. The first bound the Powers "jointly and severally," the second "jointly." The first implied an obligation on each Power to defend the country even if attacked by one or more of the guarantors, the second limited the obligation to a "collective" engagement. If the diplomatic aspect of the British guarantee had been defined, its military aspect remained vague. Talking to van de Weyer, Lord Stanley had said: "We shall see . . . I am not going further to-day . . . We shall see, and I add, put yourself promptly in a state of defence."

6

During the short period of calm which followed, the King and Queen paid an official visit to Paris, which had been delayed by the political tension. On this occasion a French paper published a significant article pointing out that France had to choose between two policies: "the one, inspired by adventurous dreams, pushed the country towards new

conquests and offered Belgium as the first victim of her ambitions; the other, respectful of the rights of an independent nation, condemned violent annexation as unjust and dangerous." The reception of the Belgian Sovereigns showed in which direction the wind blew . . . for how long?

The Luxemburg scare had at last awakened Belgian public opinion. New military credits had been voted for defence. From Paris, the King urged Rogier to complete preparations and to start the fortified works on the left bank of the Scheldt. In June he insisted on a considerable increase in the war budget. "If I did not succeed," he writes, "in impressing upon my ministers my own conviction that a strong reorganization of the army is most urgent, I would have to reproach myself all my life for having failed in my obligation towards the country." This time Rogier agreed, but the works round Antwerp were still delayed. In 1868 the contingent was raised to 12,000 men.

Meanwhile the international situation was again deteriorating and the French Press was spreading the rumour of a forthcoming customs union with Belgium. Thwarted in the political field, Napoleon was endeavouring to extend his influence through closer commercial relations, resuming the tactics adopted in 1840 by Louis-Philippe. Although the Belgian reaction was unfavourable, the French Minister in Brussels wrote to Paris that Belgian neutrality was an "inclined plane leaning gently towards France."

Suddenly, in December 1868, the news reached the Government that the French *Compagnie des Chemins de fer de l'Est* was negotiating the purchase of two important Belgian railway companies owning most of the lines running through the provinces of Liège and Luxemburg. Had this operation been concluded the French would have obtained economic and strategic control over an important part of the Belgian railways. Sensing the danger, the Government introduced

a bill preventing such sales without previous authorization. This move caused a fresh outburst of anger on the part of Napoleon. There is no doubt that he contemplated an armed invasion of Belgium. Writing to his War Minister, he insisted on the urgency of making all necessary preparations: "We must act as if war were the issue of this conflict. France feels diminished by Prussia's successes; she seeks the opportunity of restoring her influence without rousing Germany's anger . . . If a war occurred with Belgium, Germany would have no right to interfere, and if she did she would bear the responsibility of her provocative attitude . . . Belgium opens to us Germany's door; we can debouch on the Lower Rhine whenever convenient. We turn all German fortresses and stretch our hand to Holland, Hanover, etc. The Belgian army, once conquered, adds another 100,000 men to our effectives. If we lose this opportunity, when shall we find another?"*

This attempt, however, failed like the others. After the Luxemburg Conference of 1867, the British Government was perfectly aware of Napoleon's intentions and was determined to oppose his new plan if all conciliatory proposals failed. Frère-Orban maintained his attitude, but showed himself ready to discuss "all economic questions connected with the incident." While he was pursuing these difficult negotiations in Paris in April, trying to gain time, Leopold received formal assurances from England and Prussia that he could rely on the Powers' support if things came to the worst. Knowing that Clarendon had made, on the subject, a strong declaration to the French Ambassador in London, he advised his minister to ask for a last audience with the Emperor. Frère-Orban was agreeably surprised to hear that Napoleon had altered his views and was now ready to discuss the Belgian proposals. A compromise was finally

* Quoted by P. Hymans, *Frère-Orban*.

agreed upon, on April 27th, preserving Belgian rights over the Liège and Luxemburg railway lines.

Shortly afterwards the King paid a visit to Queen Victoria. He was presented, on this occasion, with an address of welcome from English municipal and local authorities. The warmth of his reception showed him that English public opinion had considerably altered during the last two years and that he could now face the future with some confidence.

7

While Belgium had overcome the crisis, her King had lost the main object of his love and ambition. On January 22nd his small boy had died at Laeken after a long illness. He was eleven years old and suffered from a weak heart, but Leopold was haunted by the idea that his son might have been the victim of the same sickness which had threatened him for so long and which he had inherited from his own mother—tuberculosis.

For months the King and Queen had been torn with anxiety. They consulted the most famous doctors in Europe. No remedy seemed to have any effect on the boy's failing health. The King had never been demonstrative. Even in his youth his coldness and self-restraint had struck those who came into contact with him. Some people said that "he had no feelings," even less than his father. If Leopold I had centred all his affections on Princess Charlotte, Leopold II had loved his heir with all the violence of a feeling which had found no outlet since his early youth. He wished to leave behind him a greater and more prosperous Belgium, so that his successor might be greater and more prosperous than he had been. He identified himself with the nation, but took it for granted that his efforts would

benefit his child and that, through him, his own life and work would be prolonged in the future. Every normal father feels a certain pride in his progeniture. In a Prince, educated in the worship of dynastic tradition, this pride becomes easily the main purpose of his existence.

Leopold's distress was so strong that he did not take the trouble to hide it. There were terrible scenes at Lacken. Even in public, at the funeral, he broke down completely, sobbing and crying during the Church service. After the ceremony he recovered his self-control and hid his grief as he had hidden his love. He scarcely ever spoke of his loss. Thirty years later, when someone remarked that he had been lucky in his undertakings, he retorted bitterly: "I . . . lucky? I have lost my son."

There were urgent measures to be taken. The country was threatened. There was an oath to be kept. He resumed "his trade." Speaking to a delegation which had come to present to him the condolences of Parliament, he even suggested that the country might benefit from his own unhappiness: "God has compensations for those whom He tries." His great colonial projects will soon stimulate his activity. He will lavish upon them all the care which he would have lavished on his growing boy. But it is not healthy for a man to be entirely absorbed by his work.

Instead of bringing them together, the blow which had struck the Queen and her husband estranged them further. As the hope of having another heir became more and more remote, the King's temper hardened. His sister Charlotte, mad with grief after the tragic death of Maximilian, was a recluse in the castle of Tervueren. His brother Philippe, Count of Flanders, might now succeed him, or one of his brother's sons? It might be the same to Belgium but it would never be the same to him.

8

In the spring of 1870 the confidential news that the King of Prussia intended to proclaim himself Emperor and to bring the Southern German States into the German Confederation caused some uneasiness to Leopold. His letter to Queen Victoria, on April 17th, shows that he nursed no grievance against France, who should "ensure more than ever her northern frontier." Belgium and Holland could render her the greatest service, he suggests, without infringing their neutrality, by forming a protecting "shield" against aggression.

In June, Belgian party politics interfere once more with the defence plans, and the Sovereign suffers a personal rebuff, for the military precautions taken by the Liberal Cabinet are partly responsible for its electoral defeat. The King calls to office Baron d'Anéthan, a moderate Catholic, and is obliged to accept among his ministers some of the leaders of the anti-militarist movement. This internal crisis made the position still more difficult, for the new men had no experience in foreign affairs.

As soon as the candidature of Leopold of Hohenzollern for the throne of Spain began to provoke tension between France and Prussia, the King, following his father's method, asked Queen Victoria to intervene in both countries. He personally urged the German Prince to withdraw, and the Count of Flanders, who, by his marriage, was the Prince's brother-in-law, wrote to the same effect. Although these efforts were ultimately successful, it was already too late to prevent the conflict, which broke out on July 19th. The Belgian army had been mobilized two days before.

The Sovereign had been compelled to dissolve Parliament in order to provide his new Cabinet with a clear majority, so that the new elections took place on August 2nd, while the

army, under General Chazal, was taking its position along the frontier. The King controlled operations from Brussels.

On July 25th Bismarck had delivered his master-stroke in allowing *The Times* to publish the text of the secret treaty proposed by Benedetti, four years before. This publication provoked a series of debates in the British Parliament, in which the rights and duty of England to interfere if the frontiers of Belgium were to be violated were strongly emphasized. Napoleon's policy stood exposed. Leopold had taken great care not to ask any assurance from one of the belligerents without asking the same assurances from the other. The notes delivered before the outbreak of hostilities, by the French and Prussian Governments, to the Belgian Ministers in Paris and Berlin, were couched in the same terms. The King had also suggested to London that promises concerning the respect of Belgian neutrality should be requested by England from France and from Prussia. These negotiations were pursued by Gladstone and Lord Granville on parallel lines and led, on August 9th and 11th, to the signature of two similar treaties confirming the engagements of 1839, in which England undertook to fight the law-breaker with all her forces, on land and sea. Austria and Russia gave their formal agreement. Gladstone's eloquent peroration, in which he declared that "the day that witnessed Belgium's absorption would hear the death-knell of public right and public law," and that "England could not be a passive witness of the worst crime that ever stained the pages of history," is too well known to be dwelt upon, but the following extract from a report of the Belgian Minister in London gives an impartial account of the British reaction to the publication of the "treaty of spoliation": "This publication has revealed to England all the prestige she has lost as a Great Power. The revelation that other Governments disposed of nations without consulting her and against her

wishes has deeply roused her and she feels the need of asserting herself anew. No better occasion could be found than in reminding the other Powers of the sanctity of treaties, from which no war could release them . . . Add to that the interest of England not to see Antwerp fall into the hands of the French, and her real sympathy for Belgium, and you will realize the motives which prompt her to help us once more."

The peril was not imminent, because the hostilities begun in Alsace only spread gradually towards the North. The battle of Sedan started on September 1st, almost within sight of the Belgian patrols which guarded the frontier. About 3,000 French soldiers escaped to Belgium after the defeat and allowed themselves to be disarmed. A few days later Napoleon, under an armed escort, crossed Belgian territory from Bouillon to Verviers, on his way to Germany.

The country had escaped the greatest peril which had endangered international peace since Waterloo. She owed her security to a series of fortunate circumstances. Neither the Prussian nor the French General Staffs had deemed it necessary to cross neutral territory in order to secure the best line of attack. Belgian defensive forces, amounting to 80,000 men, were not out of proportion with the size of the French and Prussian armies, respectively about 250,000 and 380,000 strong. Besides, neutrality, reinforced by the recent treaties negotiated in London, provided the invaluable guarantee of British support in favour of the law-abiding Power.

Both Great Britain and Belgium had benefited from the diplomatic arrangement of 1831-1839. For the first time a Franco-German war had been waged without involving the Low Countries. The edifice of Europe had been threatened, but its keystone, firmly set by forty years of patient work, had not been shaken.

After this experience it became possible to believe that future wars in Europe would be strictly limited to the two countries involved. The neutralization of the traditional battle-field appeared to be the best guarantee against a general conflagration.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT DESIGN

I

THERE is a strange similarity between the reigns of the first two kings of the Belgians. Leopold I was absorbed by the task of consolidating Belgian independence from 1830 to 1840, just as his successor had to prepare the country against the danger of the forthcoming Franco-Prussian conflict from 1865 to 1870. Later, they were both confronted with the necessity of maintaining patriotic union between parties and of strengthening the country's defences. When their activity was hampered by internal affairs, they sought wider fields for it abroad, the one in European diplomacy, the other in colonial enterprise. By temperament they loved authority, but having loyally accepted the limits imposed upon their power in Belgium, they found means of exerting it abroad.

There were, however, considerable differences. The first King of the Belgians occupied a privileged position among the Courts of Europe. Through his personal connections, he was able to make his influence felt in foreign questions in which Belgium was not even directly concerned. At home he enjoyed a prestige derived from the invaluable services he had rendered during the first years of her political life. The "men of the Revolution" could not ignore his wishes. Leopold II did not enjoy these advantages. He had come to the throne young and inexperienced, at a time when party politics were firmly established and when ministers

were far less inclined to follow their Sovereign's advice. As a man of thirty-five, he could not hope to take the place of the "Nestor of Europe" in international affairs. Disappointed in his home life, with the memory of his boy's death gnawing at his heart, he had only his work to turn to, and his work in Belgium could not satisfy his high ambition. Asking reluctant ministers to obtain military credits from a more reluctant Parliament, mitigating bitter party conflicts, were duties to be faced, not congenial occupations to a man of his character. He could not share his people's excitement about the Liberal-Catholic conflict or the scholastic question. Life in neutral Belgium appeared to him narrow and parochial, centred in small rivalries and selfish interests: "*Petit pays, petites gens.*" Had he been an art-lover or a philosopher, he might have found some relief from this petty atmosphere, but he was a man of action, with no taste for poetry or metaphysics. His dreams were of no value to him unless he succeeded in realizing them.

When Duke of Brabant, he had expounded his favourite idea to the Senate on many occasions. He had reduced it to a concise formula inscribed on the piece of marble he had picked up on the Acropolis: "Belgium must have a colony." People had shrugged their shoulders. The project was mad, impracticable, preposterous. All productive colonies were already occupied. The new countries which had not yet been seized by the English or the French were valueless, or so difficult of access and unhealthy that their development would be a gigantic task. How could little Belgium, with her scant resources, think of achieving what seemed impossible to the most powerful European States? Besides, would she be allowed to undertake such a task? Her neutral status would prevent her from taking military action. If she ever succeeded in establishing at great cost a colony in Asia or Africa, it would soon be absorbed by some powerful

rival. The whole thing was a wild and dangerous speculation. It would be a drain on the budget, it would mean a threat to security. Did Belgium really need a colony? No country in Europe was so prosperous, considering her size and population. Free Trade had come to stay; exports were growing every year; the trade of Antwerp increased by leaps and bounds. Under a régime of free competition, the country could flourish for ever owing to her low costs of production, her fertile soil, her mineral wealth and her privileged geographical position. Let other nations burden themselves with colonies; Belgium would gather the benefits of their efforts. It seemed almost incredible, in the circumstances, to urge her to become the cat's-paw of Europe.

These arguments had no effect on Leopold's convictions, for he was not working for to-day but for to-morrow or the day after to-morrow. He foresaw the danger which the country was running in linking her destiny with a commercial system which might be altered by circumstances, as the previous system had been altered a few years before. A time would come when economic barriers might be restored and fruitful markets closed. Belgium needed raw materials for her industries; she was already dependent on imports for her food-stuffs. What would happen to her population if she were left to her own resources? What would happen if, after long years of prosperous stagnation, the people lost their spirit and energy, and became spineless and self-satisfied? A colony alone could provide the necessary stimulant.

Convinced that his warnings fell upon deaf ears, Leopold ceased to expound his views, but his decision was firmer than ever. The "great design" had become a fixed idea. He had found a task worthy of his power and devoted to it henceforth all the time and energy he could spare from public duties.

Leopold II was prevented from playing as important a part in internal affairs as his father by a series of unfavourable circumstances. The cleavage between Liberals and Catholics became, during his reign, much more acute. Not only was there no hope of reviving Unionism, but it became increasingly difficult to maintain an even balance between parties and to prevent successive Prime Ministers from abusing their power and undoing each other's work. On the other hand, the defensive measures which the King pressed upon the nation were considered superfluous, owing to the false feeling of security resulting from the experience of 1870-1871. A strong and efficient army seemed almost as unnecessary as colonial possessions. Neutrality was a sufficient safeguard. In the circumstances, only a "militarist" would call on the young bourgeois to serve in the ranks as they did in other continental countries, and urge the erection of costly defensive works.

After the resignation of the Liberal Cabinet in June 1870, the Sovereign had, however, been in a position to impose his conditions on Baron d'Anéthan, the new Catholic Premier. The margin between parties being too small, a dissolution was needed to give the Government a working majority. The King had thus been able to obtain a formal promise that military credits would not be reduced and that the defensive works round Antwerp would be completed. The need of strengthening the country's defences had not been lessened by the Franco-Prussian War, for mobilization had shown that the Belgian forces were inferior to expectations, having only yielded 83,300 men instead of 95,300. Besides, both Germany and France were increasing their effectives, and the disproportion between the Belgian army

and that of the neighbouring Powers was made every year more evident.

When, therefore, the Catholic Cabinet neglected to take the necessary measures and the Catholic Press urged the reduction of armaments, the King protested strongly against what he called a "breach of promise." "We are not on an island," he wrote to d'Anéthan in May 1871; "we suffer, in spite of ourselves, the consequences of events which take place at our doors and which are not near to ending, and you know that, as far as I am concerned, I am resolved to do anything rather than govern in conditions which would imperil national security." "I defy anybody," he wrote again a few days later, "to contest . . . that if the army, instead of limiting itself to sentry duty, had had to act during the recent Franco-Prussian War, it would have been exposed to the gravest dangers and the most frightful humiliation."

Placed between his Sovereign and a turbulent majority, the Premier was in a difficult position. He objected that the King's popularity might suffer, and drew upon himself the following retort: "A popularity purchased by deceiving the country as to its true interests would be a weight on my conscience that I do not wish to carry." The relations between King and Cabinet became steadily worse. The public grew restless and, in November, disorders broke out in Brussels, following a financial scandal in which some prominent Catholics had been involved. The crowd demonstrated in the streets, and shouts of "Down with the King! Paste-board King!" were heard before the Palace. Leopold seized this pretext to ask for a resignation of his anti-militarist ministers, on the ground that "they were no longer in a position to maintain order," and placed at the head of affairs Comte de Theux, with, as Finance Minister, Jules Malou, through whom he hoped to obtain satisfaction with regard to the country's defence.

After this bold stroke, which alienated the sympathies of a large number of Catholics, Leopold takes a less active part in internal politics. He pays a visit to London, and presides over the annual banquet of the Royal Literary Fund, goes to Austria in 1873, where he meets Francis Joseph and the Tsar Alexander. Meanwhile, he pursues secretly his colonial projects in connection with the Philippine Islands, taking only a few devoted collaborators into his confidence. In 1872 his last hope of having a son is disappointed by the birth of his third daughter Clémentine.

Defence remains the main theme of the Sovereign's letters. "I am profoundly sad," he writes, in December 1872, to his minister Dumortier, "to see the importance of the military question so little understood in the country . . . All Europe arms and Belgium, more exposed than any State on the Continent, does not seem to suspect the dangers of her position. She does not realize that at every new crisis these dangers will be greater, because each time her weakness will be better known." Franco-German relations were strained. Bismarck showed little more forbearance towards the Belgian Press than Napoleon III had done. Germany was becoming the dominant factor in Europe and resented any criticism on the part of a small neutral State. In 1875 the message issued by the Belgian bishops criticizing the measures taken by the German Government against the Catholic clergy, during the *Kultur-Kampf*, provoked a diplomatic incident.

The same year Malou, who had assumed the Premiership, tried vainly to obtain an increase of the annual contingent, and the King, following a suggestion made by the German military attaché, raised for the first time the question of the defences of Liége and Namur. He also began to urge his ministers to give up the system of *remplacement*, which allowed the well-to-do to purchase a substitute for their sons in order

to exempt them from military service. Although everyone agreed that this system exerted a deplorable influence on the morale of the army, no minister could be found, in Catholic or Liberal quarters, to assume the responsibility of abolishing it. The postponement of this reform, for which he pressed again and again during his long reign, was a thorn in the King's side. It showed only too plainly that the problem of national security was not seriously considered. The electors of both parties were reluctant enough to give money; they were determined not to give their sons to safeguard Belgian independence.

After governing the country for eight years, the Catholics had to resign after an electoral defeat, and the King called once more on the Liberals, under Frère-Orban. If the Sovereign hoped that this change would bring about a considerable improvement in the country's defences, he was sorely disappointed. The new Prime Minister's activity was almost entirely absorbed by the educational problem, which he hastened to solve in favour of his own party, thus provoking a deadly conflict between the Opposition and the Majority. In January 1879 he placed all official schools under the direct control of the State, outside the influence of the clergy and of local authorities. This new law, known by its opponents as *la Loi de Malheur*, caused the creation of a number of new religious institutions which absorbed within a few months 30 per cent. of the pupils. The conflict was so bitter that the clergy refused to take part in the festivities organized on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Belgian independence and diplomatic relations with the Vatican were broken off a few months later.

The "school war" had necessitated a large expenditure and the taxpayers had suffered in consequence. Besides, the Majority was no longer united. Since 1880, the "radicals" had launched a popular campaign in favour of an

extension of the franchise, necessitating, this time, a revision of the Constitution. Faced by Frère-Orban's resistance, they had on several occasions voted with the Catholic Opposition. In 1884 the Cabinet suffered a crushing electoral defeat, at the moment when the King hoped to secure the collaboration of his Liberal ministers in realizing his colonial projects, which had at last taken a concrete form.

3

When Duke of Brabant, Leopold had discovered, in the files of the Palace, some documents regarding various attempts at Belgian colonization made between 1842 and 1848, which his father had encouraged from his private purse. A few hundred emigrants had been landed in Guatemala, a smaller number at the mouth of Rio Nunez, on the West Coast of Africa. These experiments had failed lamentably. Evidently the method of transplanting unprepared colonists to unprepared lands could not lead anywhere.

There had been other schemes, concerning the New Hebrides, the Solomon Islands and the Philippines, which did not even mature. The latter, however, retained for some time Leopold's attention, owing to the natural resources of the archipelago. In 1869, during the Spanish political crisis, he consulted Jules Malou, then director of the *Société générale*, suggesting that the Spaniards, owing to their financial difficulties, might agree to sell their colony or at least to cede it on a long lease. In spite of the objections of his adviser, the most serious of which was the presence of 40,000 Spaniards on the islands, the King pursued secret negotiations with successive Spanish leaders, and only gave up hope when Alfonso XII ascended the throne in 1874.

By that time a new idea was absorbing his attention. He

confided to Lambermont that "he wished to do something in Africa." Another of his intimate collaborators, Banning, was writing articles in the Belgian Press drawing attention to the problems of African exploration. The public had been stirred by the disappearance of Livingstone, miraculously rescued by Stanley in 1871, and by the terrible tales of savagery and cannibalism brought back by travellers. Central Africa was described as a benighted country, the hunting-ground of Arab slave-traders who, after raiding the interior, drove back towards the East Coast long caravans of negro captives. The interest was humanitarian, scientific or religious—not political. While the coast was occupied, immense tracts of land in the interior remained free from European influence. Neither the Portuguese, who occupied the best position, in Angola and Mozambique, nor the English, who, under Gladstone, had lost a great deal of their colonial eagerness, seemed inclined to assume the responsibility of developing these uncharted and inaccessible regions.

In 1876 Banning had written that "within a generation" the veil which hid the "great mystery" would be lifted, and "the victory of moral and intellectual culture, of industry and commerce" would follow the "victory of science." The King, who had studied Stanley's books and the accounts given by Rohlfs, Schweinfurth and Nachtigal of their recent explorations, shared his collaborator's conviction that Africa had a future "like America and Australia." He felt that within a few years this conviction would be shared by others, and that the present apathy of the interested Governments might be of short duration. He must, therefore, act at once, but how should he act? It was impossible to expect the Belgian Government to take the initiative. It was equally impossible for the Sovereign, as an individual, to found a colony. Politics and Belgium would have to be relegated to the background. He would, in his private

capacity, call together in Brussels an international conference of African explorers and ask them to pool their knowledge and experience. They would examine the best means of penetrating the African continent and of "establishing bases of operation" in order "to open to civilization the sole part of the globe which it has not yet penetrated."* This was undoubtedly the safest method of approach.

From the first he gave to the Conference an international and purely scientific character. His confidential correspondence shows that he was perfectly sincere in his desire to solve the riddle of Central Africa and to improve the condition of the natives, but it shows also that his initiative was only a means to an end, and that these aims were subordinated to his "great design." Belgium was scarcely mentioned during the meetings, but it never left the mind of their Royal President.

The Conference ended with the foundation of the "International Association for the Suppression of the Slave Trade and the Opening up of Central Africa." It included a Central Committee of which Leopold accepted the presidency "for a year only," and several National Committees formed in each country. With one exception, the National Committees were remarkably inactive. Their members were prominent scientists and statesmen who had little faith in the practical side of the scheme. The exception was obviously the Belgian Committee, and its secretary, Colonel Strauch, who worked under the King's instructions. It collected a capital of half a million, and prepared an expedition under the leadership of Captain Crespel and Lieutenant Cambier.

The Sovereign, while calling upon the collaboration of young Belgian officers, was more anxious than ever to emphasize the humanitarian character of the undertaking.

* Presidential address delivered by the King on September 22nd, 1876.

Speaking at the installation of the Belgian Committee, on November 6th, he declared that "the International Association must in the beginning forbid itself too vast a programme. . . . If we succeed in opening routes, in establishing stations on the lines along which the slave merchants travel, this odious traffic will be stopped, and the routes and stations . . . will aid powerfully in the conversion of the blacks and in the introduction of modern commerce and industry." To the Central Committee, which met only once, in 1877, he expressed his reluctance in accepting re-election, for "in the interests of the Association it would be better that the direction did not remain in the same hands."

It is impossible to say whether the King had already a clear vision of the results he might achieve. That he wished to obtain a foothold in the Dark Continent in order to endow his country with a prosperous colony cannot be doubted. To proclaim his aims beforehand would have been courting failure, not only abroad but also in Belgium. He proceeded, therefore, step by step, planning each successive move according to the scheme's latest developments, and not knowing where each move would lead him. He kept the "great design" firmly at the back of his mind. As Duke of Brabant, he had vainly asked Belgium "to prepare herself for an opportunity." He was now determined to use every means of creating it.

4

All plans had been laid in Brussels for an approach from the East Coast, that is to say, along the caravan routes followed by the Arab slave-traders, from Zanzibar towards the interior.

Suddenly, on October 17th, 1877, the *Daily Telegraph*

published the news of the arrival of Stanley at the mouth of the Congo. Starting from Zanzibar, the explorer had crossed the whole continent, reached Nyangwe on the Lualaba, beyond which neither Livingstone nor Cameron had been able to venture, and descended the whole course of the river, showing that it was independent from the Nile and identified itself with the Congo. The latter, which had not previously been explored from the west further than the cataracts, was one of the greatest rivers of the world, comparable to the Amazon, and offered, in spite of the falls which interrupted its course, a unique water-way opening vast unknown regions in the heart of Africa.

Although this news caused great excitement in geographical circles, few discerned at the time its enormous importance from the point of view of trade and colonization. Leopold seized this opportunity. He sent at once one of his officers and a retired American diplomatist, General Sanford, to meet Stanley at Marseilles. The latter first declined the King's invitation to come to Brussels, as, being English-born, he wished first of all to interest England in his discoveries. This might have proved a serious set-back, for if plans had to be altered and the western route adopted, the great explorer's collaboration seemed indispensable. Leopold anxiously followed Stanley's efforts to enlist British support. He read his letters to the *Daily Telegraph*, every line of which he would have endorsed: "It would be easy for me to prove that the Power which makes itself master of the Congo will absorb, in spite of the cataracts, all the commerce which lies back of the river. This water-way is, and will remain, the great commercial route to the west of Central Africa." He heard of his lectures in all the great business centres, especially in Manchester and Liverpool, and of his efforts to persuade English official and commercial circles of the immense value of the Congo basin. British public opinion

remained unfavourable. The Government, which had declined, a year before, to take over from the Sultan of Zanzibar the territories extending from the coast to Lake Tanganyika, was not likely to support such a bold enterprise.*

In his disappointment, Stanley remembered the invitation extended to him by the King of the Belgians. He paid him a first visit in June 1879, a second in November. This time they reached complete agreement. The explorer undertook to go back to the Congo and to establish a series of stations. On his side, the King gathered together a small number of bankers and business men and created the *Comité d'Etudes du Haut-Congo*, with a capital of one million francs, whose purpose it was to discover the best means of establishing communications between the lower and higher reaches of the river. Any political ambition was still disclaimed, the Committee's sole purpose being to "extend civilization and to seek new outlets for trade and industry." A Dutch group was interested, but the larger part of the capital remained in Belgian hands.

5

In spite of Leopold's diplomatic skill, it became increasingly difficult to pursue the work without obtaining some political or at least some legal status.

At the eleventh hour Stanley had received instructions urging him to negotiate, whenever possible, a number of treaties with native chiefs, securing territorial concessions and the right to build roads and cultivate the land. This was all the more necessary because a French naval officer, de Brazza, whom the King had vainly tried to enlist in his service, was

* Stanley, *Autobiography*, pul. by his wife, Dorothy Stanley.

at the time exploring the valley of the Ogowé on behalf of the French Committee of the Association. As a matter of fact, Stanley's expedition, delayed by the difficulty of transporting the parts of five steamboats, did not reach the south bank of the Pool before the end of 1881. Almost at the same time, de Brazza, pushing south from the Ogowé, planted the French flag on the northern bank.

The rivalry of the two explorers working for two separate Committees of the same international association raised a difficult problem; the flag itself raised another. The Belgian flag could not be used, for obvious reasons. Several agents had already dwelt on the necessity of adopting an official standard, and we are told that when Colonel Gordon, who was to become the hero of Khartoum, was approached, he made it a condition of his collaboration that the International Association should have its own colours. After long discussions, the King decided on a blue flag with a golden star. One morning he exclaimed joyfully: "I have found it . . . during the night. There will be a star in the middle . . . my star, my star!"*

The King's private correspondence with Strauch during these years shows the minute care he lavished on his work. He followed step by step the progress of Stanley, who had at last launched his steamers on the Pool and sent them eastwards. The *Comité d'Etudes*, having spent most of its capital, was converted into the *Association internationale du Congo*, in order to facilitate the conclusion of treaties with the natives. All employees of the new association were bound to secrecy. It was urgent not to alarm Belgian opinion, it was still more urgent not to prompt de Brazza to further exertion, for the explorer was now working for the French Government and had become a formidable rival.

The recruiting of the personnel presented serious diffi-

* P. Daye, *Léopold II*, p. 175.

culties. "Send Stanley what he asks for," Leopold writes in September 1880: "a good engineer and a good sailor. It is not necessary that they should be Belgians . . ." He enters into every detail, foresees every difficulty. At the same time, he keeps in touch with his foreign colleagues, the Presidents of the "national committees," Mackinnon in England, de Lesseps in France. The latter proved invaluable in preventing the rivalry between Stanley and de Brazza from degenerating into a political conflict.

The Association was, in fact, engaged in an undertaking which needed the power of a State to become legal and permanent. Its position could be compared with that of some English and Dutch companies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; it was no longer regular in the nineteenth. "We shall never be able to exert an important influence for civilization," wrote the King, in October 1882, "as long as we do not possess independent territories and adequate rights to govern them."

That was the next problem. The Association had its flag; it had even concluded treaties with natives, but it was not in a position to deal with European States. Was it possible to pass gradually from a private to a public status, without awakening Belgian suspicions and foreign jealousies? Stanley was now engaged in establishing stations east of the Pool. The French were still active and the Portuguese, in Angola, were endeavouring to extend their sphere of influence towards the North.

During 1883 Leopold prepares himself for the crisis which confronts him. At any moment he may hear that his agents have come into armed conflict with their rivals, or that some Power lays claim to a vital part of the future "colony." He writes to Granville in order to obtain British protection "against possible attacks from France or possible Portuguese ambitions." He speaks at the same time of

coming to an agreement with the French and forming with them a joint company for the exploitation of the Congo railway. He even toys for a time with the idea of creating a "confederation of native States." Funds are running low again. "We shall not be able," he writes in September, "to pursue, beyond 1885, the financial effort which we made in 1883 . . . After that date, our expenses must be reduced to one million francs per year." The bankers and business men had suspended their contributions. Leopold was now to finance the scheme alone.

6

The news of the Anglo-Portuguese treaty of February 1884 seemed to seal the fate of the "great design." Britain and Portugal were prepared to support each other on the West Coast of Africa, and on the Lower Congo, which was placed under Portuguese sovereignty.

Although the projected treaty was not directed against the Association, it seriously jeopardized its future. The King, very much alarmed, tried to gain time, asked for some changes in the draft, suggesting that his small stations on the Lower Congo should at least enjoy the position of "free cities," like Bremen or Lübeck." He had always hesitated to adopt Banning's advice that the Association should be recognized by Belgium and that the Belgian flag should be hoisted on its stations. Faced with this new danger, he approached Frère-Orban, who refused to entertain the suggestion. His letter shows how unresponsive the Belgians were to their Sovereign's efforts: "Belgium does not need a colony. The Belgians do not care for oversea enterprises; they prefer to spend their energy in explored lands and to invest their capital in safer undertakings . . . You may nevertheless assure His Majesty of all my sympathy for the

generous project he has conceived, on condition that it does not provoke any international difficulty." Malou was scarcely more encouraging. He tempered his refusal of political support by the remark that "such an active Sovereign should have a hobby on which to spend his superfluous energy."*

Had Leopold's efforts been met in the same way abroad, his work would not have survived the Anglo-Portuguese treaty. Fortunately for him, other Powers showed an active interest in the new situation created on the West Coast of Africa. France refused to accept the Portuguese claims to the mouth of the Congo, and Bismarck, whose interest in colonial problems had recently been roused, declared that he could not admit that a portion of the coast, which "had hitherto been considered free," should be included in an Anglo-Portuguese sphere of influence. Further, the campaign undertaken in the United States by General Sanford had borne fruit. In April the Association received at last official recognition, and the American Government, in exchange for a promise to maintain the territories free to the trade of all nations, declared its sympathy for the Association's "humanitarian and generous purpose" in "managing the interests of the free States established" in the Congo. A few weeks later the King secured the support of Jules Ferry, the French Prime Minister. He undertook, through Strauch, "not to cede to any other Power the stations and territories of the Association," and as a token of friendship to give France preference should circumstances compel the organization to sell its possessions. Besides preventing French encroachment, this proposal had the great advantage of checking rival Powers from pressing the Association to surrender its claims. Leopold hastened to explain to von Brandenburg, German Minister in Brussels, that his main

* P. Daye, *Léopold II*, p. 203.

purpose in making this arrangement with France was to oppose Portuguese ambitions. Bismarck, who had conceived the project of converting the new territories into a German protectorate, was thus prevented from starting negotiations.*

The campaign against Portuguese claims was pursued by the Association through Stanley in England, Bleichröder in Germany, de Lesseps in France and Sanford in America. The arguments marshalled by Banning in a learned *mémoire* were used to great effect. The rivalry of the Powers allowed Leopold to remain on the defensive. Bismarck proved his most potent ally. Germany was a late-comer in the colonial field and had an evident interest in preserving for the future a large area free from foreign domination. In June the Chancellor made a definite stand against the Anglo-Portuguese treaty, and succeeded in modifying Granville's policy.

For months the King had been manœuvring in order to bring about an understanding with Germany on the same basis as the one reached with the United States. He also urged the necessity of giving the Association an independent status. On September 4th he received a long letter from the Chancellor agreeing in principle to the proposed convention and suggesting that an international Conference of the Powers might be called "in order to recognize the new State and a few principles to be applied in the relations of the Governments with the Congo States."

7

It would be absurd to compare the situation of the Congo in 1884 with that of Belgium in 1830. There are neverthe-

* Robert Stanley Thompson: *Fondation de l'Etat indépendant du Congo* (1923), p. 175.

less certain similarities between the circumstances which allowed the Belgian nation to proclaim her independence and those which led to the foundation of her great colony.

The Congo basin was not the "keystone" of Africa, but it was the largest stretch of territory which remained free to colonial enterprise. Its possession by one of the big Powers would have given the owner an enormous advantage over the others. If either France or England obtained the mastery in the Congo, she would occupy henceforth a central position across the Cape-to-Cairo route. Neither of them could tolerate the presence of Germany in this vast region, which would exclude any hope of further expansion. At the same time, none of the Powers were prepared to fight for the annexation of the Congo or to undertake the enormous expenses involved in its development. They preferred, therefore, to maintain and even to strengthen the *status quo*, and to postpone their claims until circumstances appeared more propitious. It was thought that the "Association" or the State which might replace it would always remain too weak to defend itself. The cynics remarked that it was unlikely that it would ever find sufficient resources to pay its way. Difficulties were bound to arise which would give active competitors their chance. Was it not better to let the plum ripen before plucking it, and meanwhile to allow Leopold to squander his fortune on his hobby?

The Berlin Conference of 1884, like the London Conference of 1830, was necessitated by the rivalry of the Powers, none of which would permit the others to install themselves on contested ground. England was ready to give diplomatic support to Portuguese interests, but did not wish to go further. France, having established stations in the North, realized the danger of pursuing her advantage too far, and satisfied herself with the right of first option offered by Leopold.

Germany, the last-comer in the colonial field, was particularly anxious to keep the Congo basin "free" for the purpose of further expansion and to thwart British and French ambitions. The recognition of an independent State in the Congo basin, under an international régime guaranteeing complete freedom of trade, solved temporarily the African problem, as the recognition of an independent and neutral Belgium had solved the European crisis fifty-three years before. If no country seemed to benefit directly from the arrangement, no Power at least suffered by it.

From Brussels the King showered instructions upon his Belgian representatives, Lamermont and Banning. Leopold had inherited his father's diplomatic skill and excelled, as he did, at defending Belgian interests by playing the Powers off against each other. His main anxiety was still the mouth of the Congo, the only way of access from the sea to the vast domain he hoped to create in the hinterland. When, in December, France and Portugal, his chief opponents, seemed to agree in sharing the Lower Congo between them, he threatened to give up the whole enterprise and abandon the Association's territories to European competition. He found a staunch supporter in John A. Kasson and Sanford, the American delegates. "I hear from a confidential source," he writes to Lamermont in Berlin, "that France and Portugal are coming to an agreement to pounce, the one on the Naidi-Quillou, the other on the Lower Congo, at the end of the Conference. For your personal information it is useful that you should know that, if such a thing occurred, I am irrevocably decided to dismiss immediately my personnel in Africa, after having ordered the destruction of *tout le matériel*, and to give up everything. I have no right, as King of the Belgians, to expose my country to the consequences of a struggle against two Powers, one of which is a guarantor of her neutrality." A similar argument

had been used during the discussions which led, in 1831, to the conclusion of the Treaty of XVIII Articles. Once more, the Powers were faced with the alternative of coming into conflict or making a vital concession. After a bitter struggle, during which he had to give up large areas now belonging to the French Congo, Leopold succeeded finally in retaining thirty-five kilometres of the coast, co-sovereignty of the mouth of the river, and a sufficient corridor to allow the building of a railway from the Lower Congo to the Pool. It was agreed that the new State would grant no preference, impose no tariffs, no duties and no restrictions on navigation. Under these conditions it received full recognition and enjoyed, in fact, the sovereign rights of an ordinary State.

Nowhere is the similarity between the discussions of the London and Berlin Conference more apparent than in the question of neutrality. The line taken by the American delegation in this matter may be compared with the policy followed by Palmerston. Kasson proposed that the free zone should be extended beyond the geographical basin of the Congo, from sea to sea, and its perpetual neutrality proclaimed. England and Germany supported the suggestion, which was strongly opposed by France and Portugal, on the ground that it affected the sovereignty of the States who already possessed some territories in the region. Leopold had always conceived that the future State should be neutralized. In a letter to Bismarck dated August 8th, 1884, he spoke already of "an independent and neutral State." In his mind these territories were to return one day to Belgium and it was necessary to harmonize the status of the future colony with that of the Mother Country. In order to circumvent France's objections, Banning proposed that neutrality should be "optional," that is to say that the Powers would recognize this regime if the States of the Congo basin chose to adopt it. This solution, which was finally approved,

provided a diplomatic guarantee similar, if not identical, to that enjoyed by Belgium.

It is worthy of notice that the Association, whose delegate did not sit officially at the Conference, was scarcely mentioned during these long discussions. Its existence could not be officially acknowledged before a solution had been reached. The French delegate, de Courcel, called it wittily "the lady of our dreams" (*la dame de nos pensées*). Its official recognition was, to a great extent, due to Bismarck, who wished to create in Africa a Balance of Power similar to that which he had created in Europe. As early as November 2nd, the Chancellor had informed Granville that his Government "considered desirable, in the interest of trade and civilization, that the Association should be recognized by all the Powers, as it has already been by the United States." In spite of his desire to agree with Bismarck, Granville raised some legal objections. The British Government finally expressed its willingness to negotiate with the Association on the basis of the most favoured nation and to acknowledge its flag.

Belgium, according to this paradoxical situation, was, with Turkey, the last State to recognize the Association. In the latter's name, Strauch addressed a letter to Bismarck in which he expressed his thanks for the happy issue of the Conference, and the last sitting was devoted to the expression of eloquent tributes to the absent Sovereign of the new State.

The negotiations which led to the signature of the Berlin Act are unique in history. The programme of the Conference included the freedom of trade in the Congo basin and the application to the Congo and the Niger of the principle "regulating the navigation of international rivers, such as the Danube." Out of this modest agenda emerged a political system regulating the colonial expansion of all the Powers in equatorial Africa, and the creation of a vast State, including

large tracts of unexplored country, under the sovereignty of the President of the Association. The dream of 1876 had not yet come true, but enormous progress had been realized. The Congo was not yet Belgian, but, after a number of metamorphoses, it had at last assumed the shape of a regular State under the sovereignty of the King of the Belgians. "It was thought," declared Sir Edward Mallet, the British representative, "that the enterprise was too great to be a success. It now appears that the King was right and that the idea which he followed was not a Utopia." But none of the delegates, not even Bismarck, suspected this "idea." They thought that the Sovereign was prompted by humanitarian motives, that he chose to venture his personal fortune in a bold speculation, or that he wished simply to exercise abroad an authority which he could not exercise freely in his own country. How could they think of a Belgian colony? If foreign diplomats were well informed, they must have known that the King had had some difficulty in obtaining from his Government an undertaking that the Belgian delegation should take an active part in the discussion. He had apparently taken no step in order to obtain recognition. His flag was not the Belgian flag, a large number of his agents were foreigners. By granting the widest freedom to trade, he seemed to have renounced beforehand the economic advantages which his country might one day derive from the enterprise. The only link between the Congo and Belgium was Leopold himself.*

* Robert Stanley Thompson: *Fondation de l'Etat indépendant du Congo*, 1923.

CHAPTER IX

THE ADVENT OF DEMOCRACY

I

THE French agitator Proudhon wrote, in 1862, that he could only find "one republican among ten thousand Belgians, and no Socialist." The statement was scarcely exaggerated. In spite of the fact that the country was becoming every year more industrialized and that the wages were lower than in neighbouring States, no serious attempt was made by the workers themselves to improve their conditions. Up to 1884, Belgium had been the promised land of economic Liberalism. Nowhere else were the doctrines of Free Trade and free competition practised more faithfully. The same dogmatic reason which provoked Frère-Orban's opposition to the King's colonial projects caused his resistance to any interference of the State in industrial questions. For the Liberals of his generation economic expansion was independent from colonial possessions, just as industrial activity should remain free from social legislation. In both cases the Government's intervention was unwarranted. The law of supply and demand had become a dogma and applied to labour as well as to goods. Private charity was considered the only remedy for the miserable conditions of the labouring class.

The creation of the "International Association of Workers" in London, in 1864, had had little effect on a population which was powerless to combine against the abuses of

Capitalism and which the Church maintained in a state of obedient submission. It was not before 1880, when the first co-operative society, the *Vooruit*, was established in Ghent, that the Belgian workers began to realize their power. They were still divided, however, with regard to the best means of reaching their aim. The Walloons advocated violent and revolutionary methods, the Flemings were more moderate and wished to remain faithful to the Constitution. The foundation of the *Parti ouvrier belge* in Brussels, five years later, was the result of a compromise between these two factions. It was agreed that all forces should henceforth combine on the conquest of the franchise.

The year 1885 is of utmost importance in Belgian history. It marks at the same time the end of the bourgeois regime and the beginning of the democratic era, the advent of Socialism and the foundation of the Congo Free State. The latter is linked up with the development of World Capitalism, as the former is connected with Labour Internationalism. It seems as if the country passed from closed to open surroundings, and the narrow interests which absorbed its attention were suddenly broadened. The King had dreamed of expansion. He wished to bring Belgium in contact with the world and sought in this change the solution of economic and social difficulties. He had not foreseen that the transformation should occur at home as well as abroad, and that, at the very moment when his great project had at last materialized, a new force would be knocking at the gate and a third party would claim its share in Belgian politics.

On the morrow of the fall of the Frère-Orban Cabinet, the Sovereign had asked a moderate Catholic, Jules Malou, to take over the Premiership, but Malou had brought with him into the Cabinet men like Woeste and Jacobs, well known for their anti-militarism. Contrary to the Royal advice, the Government, after re-establishing relations with

the Vatican, passed a series of party measures directed against the Liberals. They abolished the new Ministry of Education and placed again the official schools under the control of local authorities, undoing most of the work accomplished under the previous regime. Realizing that he could never obtain from his Government the close collaboration which he needed concerning the Congo and the army, Leopold seized the opportunity offered by the next Communal elections, which marked a considerable reaction in favour of the Opposition, to remodel the ministry under Auguste Beernaert, a former Liberal who had joined the Catholics and who was prepared to pursue a national policy of appeasement.

Beernaert, who succeeded in maintaining his position for ten years, became the King's faithful collaborator and adviser. He persuaded Parliament to pass the necessary bill allowing Leopold to assume the sovereignty of the Congo State, and to make some sacrifice for the defence of Belgium. But his greatest achievement was perhaps the way in which he succeeded in piloting the country through the difficult crisis which preceded the revision of the Constitution, and to allow it to pass without disruption from a *censitaire* to a democratic régime.

2

At the beginning of 1886, the Belgian Parliament, absorbed by party politics, did not realize the danger which threatened the privileged class which they represented. It was known that Socialism had made some progress among a minority of educated workers, and that French republican ideas provoked from time to time violent outbursts in public meetings and in pamphlets, but these revolutionary mani-

festations were considered as superficial. No strike had hitherto taken a general character and the workers were not sufficiently organized to exert considerable influence. Owing to a period of economic depression, wages had been lowered during the previous year or two and a large number of employees had been dismissed, but it was thought that this crisis would pass without trouble, as many others had passed before.

Suddenly, on March 18th, riots broke out in Liège, after a meeting celebrating the anniversary of the Paris Commune. The next day the strike spread to the Hainaut, paralysing the coal and iron industries. Bands of strikers wandered through the country-side plundering the farms and burning the houses of some employers. The army had to be called out and it took nearly a fortnight to restore order, not without bloodshed. It was first thought that the insurrection had been engineered by a few leaders who could be convicted of "plotting against the security of the State," but no proof could be found against the few agitators who had been arrested, and it soon became evident that the movement had been entirely spontaneous and had surprised the Socialists themselves.

This explosion did more to shake the confidence in the *censitaire* regime than years of propaganda. A large number of Catholics and Liberals had to admit that the granting of urgent reforms was the only means of stemming the tide. It was better to tamper with the sacred doctrine of *laissez faire, laissez passer*, than to be faced with a revolution. Beernaert seized this opportunity and instituted a "Labour Commission" to enquire into the condition of the workers. On opening the next parliamentary session, the King declared that "the fruitful principles of freedom had perhaps too much been relied upon," and that "public law should protect more efficiently the weak and the poor." Public

opinion realized at last that Belgium, who had for long been considered as a model constitutional country, had been left behind by other nations, such as Germany, with regard to social legislation. The Catholics specially altered their attitude. They saw at once that the only means of countering the Socialist movement, which they opposed owing to its republican and anti-clerical tendencies, was to steal their enemy's thunder and to initiate social reforms. They were confirmed in this attitude by the well-known encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891. The Chamber adopted forthwith a series of measures against drunkenness and the abuse of the *truc-system*; housing reforms were introduced and the Government created special Councils for settling labour disputes.

The 1886 riots had also stimulated the zeal of the Socialists. A powerful campaign was organized in the industrial districts during the following year. In order to avoid being dismissed, crowds of workers gathered in the dark and listened to the speeches of their invisible leaders. Imposing demonstrations in favour of the general franchise followed the red flag in Brussels, Liège and Charleroi. The "advanced" Liberals, or Radicals, joined forces with the Socialists and demanded that the Constitution should be revised and the *cens* abolished.

It soon appeared that the country was faced with the alternative of "revision or revolution." Under the threat of a general strike, Parliament was compelled to adopt the principle of revision in 1892. The threat was maintained during the deliberations of the *Constituante* and was put into execution on the morrow of the rejection of universal suffrage, on April 12th, 1893. The memory of the 1886 riots was too near to allow further resistance, and the franchise was adopted a few days later. In spite of the fact that the reform was tempered with the introduction of

plural voting, giving an extra vote to fathers of families, property owners and electors having completed their secondary education, it increased the electorate tenfold—from 137,000 to 1,370,000—and transformed the political life of the country.

3

Leopold was disappointed at this sudden victory of the Socialists. He wished to compensate the increase in the electorate by an increase in the power of the Executive in order to restore the constitutional balance. He had openly suggested the adoption of the referendum, on the Swiss model, giving the Sovereign the faculty of consulting the nation directly on a question of principle, or on a bill which, "although voted by Parliament, had not yet received the Royal sanction." He considered, no doubt, that this right of appeal might strengthen his hand in his relations with his Cabinet, but he hoped also that it would attenuate the evil of party politics from which the country had been suffering for so long. His initiative was interpreted as an attempt to obtain dictatorial power; the referendum "savoured of Caesarism." Leopold insisted, invoked the opinion of Lord Salisbury, whom he consulted on this matter, suggested that he might be compelled to abdicate, but was finally obliged to give way.

The King had devoted friends but was no longer liked by the crowd. Never was a great patriot more alien to the temperament of his countrymen. The misunderstanding was mutual. The Belgians were unable to realize the Sovereign's passionate devotion to national interests. He could not sympathize with their worship of family life, their homeliness, their narrow, sentimental interest in local

affairs, their love of pageantry and ancient tradition. The King was accused of megalomania when he wished to endow Belgium with a great colony, and of militarism when he warned her of the very real dangers which threatened her. Hurt by these suspicions, he scorned a popularity which had left him, and did not resist the temptation to ridicule the "small land" and the "small people" to which he was nevertheless deeply attached and for which he worked unceasingly.

Even under the *censitaire* régime these differences had been felt by the *bourgeoisie*. The gulf widened considerably after the revision. The Belgian Socialists of 1892 had been strongly influenced by the French Commune and were essentially republican. They would have opposed the Sovereign on principle, even if he had been a mere figure-head. But Leopold was a power. He applied in the Congo modern capitalistic methods and allied himself to international financiers. He urged an increase in the army, no doubt with the intention of crushing a future revolution. Attacks against the King, his intimate life, his quarrels with his daughters, his grandiose plan, became the usual theme of the Socialist Press. With some inconsistency, Leopold, denounced one day for his "abuse of authority," was derided the next as a powerless "cardboard King." Any stick was good enough to beat the arch-enemy whose dark shadow became for many ignorant workers the main obstacle standing between the present age of iron and the golden age of the future.

For the first time in modern history, a Belgian Sovereign was publicly insulted. The King was hissed and booed on several occasions when he appeared in the streets. When he opened Parliament in November 1892, the Socialists were so abusive that he decided never to set foot in the Chamber again. Ministers were no longer able to shelter

the Crown. The Sovereign was made responsible for every unpopular measure taken by the Cabinet, whether he approved it or not. Too proud to defend himself against unjust attacks, Leopold held himself more and more aloof and this scornful attitude still further exasperated Socialist opinion.

There was one question, however, on which the King and his adversaries agreed: the suppression of substitution in the army. For years the Sovereign had urged personal service, which was also on the Socialist programme. But when the Socialists thought themselves inspired by social justice, the Sovereign was supposed to defend the reform for selfish motives.

4

The problem of the country's defence had come to the fore once more during the European crisis of 1887.

Since 1875 the Powers had contemplated the eventuality of a "war of revenge" following France's defeat. Steps had been taken in those days to ascertain the attitude of Belgium and the measures she would be able to take for the defence of her neutrality. The German military attaché in Brussels had expressed the wish to see the road of the Meuse efficiently barred to a potential invader, and a British military mission under Colonel Home had made enquiries concerning the landing of British forces which might be sent to reinforce the Belgian army round Antwerp.* Brialmont and Banning, in complete agreement with the King, contended that the fortified camp of Antwerp was no longer sufficient and that both Namur and Liège should be fortified in order to delay the progress of an invader coming from the South or from the East.

* W. Rudiger: *La Belgique et l'Equilibre européen*, p. 271.

As early as 1879, Brialmont had foreseen that the strong fortifications recently erected along the Franco-German frontier were an inducement to turn the positions through Belgium. In a confidential *mémoire*,* Banning had explained that military policy was tending more and more towards the Meuse, as it had formerly been directed towards the Rhine. The King was convinced that the plan of defence should be altered, and that Belgium was no longer able to fulfil her engagements towards the Powers if her army was not in a position to make a stand before retiring upon Antwerp.

When, owing to the popularity of General Boulanger, the champion of the *Revanche*, Europe was faced with a dangerous crisis, Germany pressed once more the Belgian Government to take strong measures to bar the road of the Meuse. In January 1887 Count von Brandenburg, the German Minister in Brussels, approached Beernaert on the subject and the King seized this opportunity to urge the building of the new forts. "We must prevent any foreign army from crossing Belgian territory without striking a blow," he wrote. "Not to do so would be to commit suicide. We should once more become the battle-field of France and Germany. . . . We must act without further loss of time." The next month, Beernaert obtained an increase in the War budget, but Leopold was not satisfied. "I implore you," he wrote to the Prime Minister in April, "not to let the project of the Meuse drag any longer."†

The King's anxiety was well founded. Since 1870 it had been taken for granted that the violation of Belgian neutrality would never be tolerated by England. Bismarck, however, had his doubts, as it appears from the conversation he had in September 1885 with Sir Philip Currie. The

* *Considérations politiques sur la défense de la Meuse.*

† Van der Smissen: *Léopold II et Beernaert.*

British Government, under Lord Salisbury, had grown hostile to French colonial policy, while Anglo-German relations had become particularly friendly. It was to be feared that England might no longer observe the impartial attitude indispensable to the working of the Belgian guarantee. When the tension increased, in January 1887, Beernaert, urged by the King, enquired whether it would not be possible for Great Britain to renew the conventions concluded in 1870, but the question remained unanswered. The next month, Alfred Austin published in the *Standard* a series of articles in which he suggested that, in case of armed conflict, England should depart from the policy adopted in 1870, and allow a "right of way" to German troops through Belgium, on condition that Bismarck should not annex Belgian territory. The alarm caused in Brussels by this publication is reflected in the diplomatic correspondence between Lord Vivian, British Minister in Brussels, and Lord Salisbury. The latter disclaimed all responsibility for the *Standard* articles, but refused to tie his hands in any way. To use Lord Vivian's own words, "that was the only crumb of comfort which Belgium could obtain at the time." The tone of Lord Vivian's dispatches leaves no doubt concerning the grave views which he took of the situation. "I understand from your Lordship's silence," he writes, on February 26th, "that Her Majesty's Government considers it inopportune or inexpedient to express any opinion on the validity of the Treaty Guarantee of the neutrality of Belgium, or to commit themselves in any way as to their future policy."*

Leopold made a last attempt to obtain some definite assurances when he went to London, in June, to attend the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria. The Belgian Chamber had at last voted the credits for the fortifications on the

* *British Documents, etc.*, VIII, 375; Lady Gwendolen Cecil: *Life of Robert Marquis of Salisbury*, III and IV.

Meuse, to the great satisfaction of the Powers, especially Germany. Now was the time to adopt personal service. From Buckingham Palace the King addressed to Beernaert a series of anxious letters, but the Premier did not wish to ask further concessions from his anti-militarist followers. The King multiplied his efforts, writing to Leo XIII in order to obtain his support with the Catholics, alluding to the reform in public speeches, interviewing personally, after his return to Brussels, a number of recalcitrant deputies of the Right and of the Left. In spite of his feverish activity, the measure, introduced by a private member, was defeated by a small majority, on July 19th.

The Sovereign was deeply disappointed. In April he had received a letter from the German Emperor congratulating him on his projects for improving Belgian defences, and drawing his attention to the fact that an increase in the Belgian forces "was still more important than the building of forts." Leopold had obtained the forts but had been refused the men.

Until his death he never ceased to insist on the necessity of increasing and reorganizing the army, which was far below the minimum required by the most conservative estimates: enough men to garrison the forts and a field army 150,000 strong. He was perhaps less tolerant of opposition in the question of defence than in any other, and could not restrain his indignation at the lack of patriotism of the Majority. Contrary to the advice of his ministers, he referred publicly to this question on several occasions. His private correspondence contains a number of letters asking friends and collaborators to warn the country in time, "since he could no longer make himself heard." He succeeded in restraining his temper when opposed in other matters, but the army remained with him a burning subject. The fact that he could not open the eyes of his compatriots

to a danger which grew from year to year more evident filled him with bitterness. What were all his other projects compared with Belgian security and independence? If, through sheer neglect, neutrality remained defenceless, the country, with all her wealth, all her possessions, would be at the mercy of the conqueror. What mattered that he had secured a colony eighty times larger than Belgium if he did not succeed in saving Belgium herself?

The 1887 crisis ended after the death of General Boulanger, but Germany and the Triple Alliance had obtained the hegemony in Europe. Against this formidable alliance grew another combination of Powers, the Franco-Russian Duplice concluded in 1896, and the Anglo-French *Entente* sealed in 1904. This created a new situation which was particularly unfavourable to Belgium. The Franco-German conflict degenerated into a European conflict and the guarantors of Belgian neutrality were now grouped into two opposite camps. Worse still, England, who had hitherto held the balance and who had been able to safeguard Belgium in 1870, owing to her impartial attitude, was now directly involved. The political obstacle which had hitherto prevented French and German strategists from planning future operations without regard for Belgian neutrality, had to a great extent disappeared. Leopold did not know that the German Staff had already adopted such a plan and that William II was more and more inclined to agree with his military advisers, but he realized that the situation of Belgium was becoming increasingly difficult and that the defensive measures for which he pleaded in vain were more urgent than ever.

These feelings were confirmed by the impression the King gained from a visit paid to the German Emperor in January 1904, which von Bülow describes at length in his *Memoirs*. There was no love lost between the two monarchs.

While Leopold understood perfectly Bismarck's methods, he had always questioned the wisdom of the unbalanced and impulsive monarch who held the fate of Europe in his hands. He was nevertheless aghast at being placed between the alternative of incurring his host's hostility or agreeing to step into the shoes of Charles the Bold and annex "French Flanders, Artois and the French Ardennes." The suggestion of raising black troops in Africa seemed scarcely more practicable. When the King tried to dismiss these proposals with the remark that they would not prove particularly attractive to his Cabinet and to the Belgian Parliament, the Emperor "lost all patience" and the interview ended abruptly.

Leopold only entrusted his secret to a few confidants, among them Baron van der Elst, who had succeeded Lamermont at the Belgian Foreign Office,* but he made the reorganization of the army the theme of all his utterances. At the age of seventy, he launched a vigorous campaign in favour of the reform. He wrote to his new Minister for War a letter which, according to his wish, was communicated to the Press: "You know that some of the members of Parliament asked . . . the reduction of the size of the annual contingent. The realization of these ideas would have been . . . a disaster . . . I persist in believing that personal service would be helpful to the national defence . . . I have never hidden from the country my opinion of what her interests demand, but it is for the nation to provide the necessary means of its own free will."

The seventy-fifth anniversary of Belgian independence was duly celebrated throughout the country. People expected from the Sovereign the usual self-congratulatory speeches. Had not the country the right to be proud of her

* Van der Elst: *La Préméditation de l'Allemagne* (*Revue de Paris*, August 1923).

flourishing trade, her great public works and of a rich crop of scientific and artistic achievements? Disregarding the popularity he might have derived from these ceremonies, Leopold repeatedly referred to the burning subject of defence, which he knew was distasteful to the majority of his audience. "I hope Belgium has before her long years of prosperity," he declared in Ghent, adding abruptly, "it depends on her to make sure of them." On July 21st Brussels had prepared a great pageant in front of the Palace of Justice. There was music and a number of pompous orations celebrating the virtues of the Mother Country and of the Belgian nation. Leopold's sincere realism was stirred by his people's self-delusion. "In addition to speeches," he remarked drily, amid an embarrassed silence, "acts are needed. It is the latter alone which assure the life of peoples and allow them to overcome the difficulties of existence . . . May the seventy-fifth anniversary of our independence be marked by the adoption of the fine measure submitted to the Chambers. . . . This bill guarantees our security without increasing the taxes by one *centime* or the contingent by one man." In Antwerp, the centre of anti-militarism, he went further still, disregarding all convention and precedent. He asked his audience: "Would you be led down the fatal path of decadence?" and after receiving the answer said: "Then it is quite simple. Let us solidly barricade the road to decadence; let us mount a vigilant and patriotic guard in order to preserve the country from an irreparable calamity."

In February 1909 he said to Senator Wiener, one of the faithful collaborators of his last years: "We must have a good army in order to defend ourselves and, according to our international obligations, to prevent anyone from passing through us, or at least make the passage as onerous as possible, so that no one should be tempted to try. *Treaties*

nowadays are, unfortunately, no longer respected. You will be doing a patriotic work in repeating to the Belgian people . . . that to maintain their independence they must prepare to support it with forces proportionate to the needs of our position and *to all that is going on around us.*" The Kaiser's angry voice was still ringing in his ears.

At last, in December, the Chamber adopted personal service. Leopold was on his death-bed at Laeken. To the doctors who advised an immediate operation he asked for a short postponement. He was still anxious about the Senators' decision, and suggested that his successor, Prince Albert, should register his vote. On being told that this might harm the Prince's popularity he sighed. "Popularity! I had it, it left me. It comes and goes like the tide. It's like froth . . . Nothing remains of it." The next day, the 14th, after receiving the last sacrament, he said to the surgeon: "I am ready, but when I wake up I must find myself on this couch. I have some work to do." Immediately after the operation, which lasted half an hour, the news reached Laeken that the Senate had passed the military bill. The King was overjoyed but clamoured for the text. He wished to sign it at once. It came at last at six o'clock in the evening, and the Sovereign was able to trace his name in a trembling hand. He died two days later. It had taken him over thirty years to convert his people.

5

The long resistance of Parliament to Leopold's insistent demand for military reform was to a certain extent due to the revision of the Constitution. The first result of the general franchise was to place the Catholics in power for the next twenty years. The election of October 1894 gave

them 104 seats against 34 to the Socialists and 14 only to the Liberals. True, the Catholics had altered their social policy in order to check the Socialist influence, but they had not changed their attitude concerning the question of defence. Partly through self-delusion, partly through electoral interest, they did not believe that the country was exposed to any serious danger. The motto, "Not a penny, not a man!" was too popular to be discarded.

Six months before, the Sovereign had lost his faithful collaborator Beernaert. In order to attenuate the effects of the electoral reform, the Prime Minister had wished to introduce what he called the "representation of minorities," a system better known to-day under the name of proportional representation. But his prestige was exhausted after the ordeal of revision and he was obliged to resign in March 1894.

Beernaert had given the King his whole-hearted support not only during the Berlin Conference but during the critical period which followed. Never was the new Sovereign of the Congo more active than when he had apparently achieved his end. He multiplied the number of expeditions along the Ubangi, the Kasai and the Kwango, pushing the problematic limits of his domain as far as possible into the interior, before the Commission of Delimitation started their work. In June 1885 he sent to Bismarck an Act of Neutrality, with a map on which the territories of the Association were considerably increased. Later exploration revealed that most of the mineral resources of the new State were hidden in the extreme South and the extreme North. Had not this bold initiative been taken, the Congo would be deprived to-day of copper, radium and diamonds. On August 1st he informed the Powers that he had "taken the title of Sovereign of the Independent State of the Congo." He combined the

functions of constitutional monarch of one of the smallest countries in Europe with those of absolute ruler of the largest African possession. It was a most difficult part to play. He had been given practically a free hand in the Congo, but he was left to his own resources and he had already invested a large part of his fortune in the enterprise. If he called upon foreign capital he exposed himself to foreign control, and the Belgian Parliament was not yet prepared to give him any support.

Ever since Stanley's discovery he had fixed his choice on the western route. Since the Germans had established their sovereignty on Dar-es-Salaam and were proceeding towards Lake Tanganyika, it became every year more necessary to build the railway between the mouth of the Congo and the Pool. Leopold conceived the plan of issuing a premium loan and created the *Compagnie du Congo*. He found in Colonel Thys a most active collaborator who succeeded in obtaining funds from a number of Belgian bankers and industrialists, but the difficulties of labour and transport were such that the capital produced by this first loan proved inadequate.

In 1889 Beernaert obtained from Parliament a second loan. "There are times in the life of nations," wrote Leopold to him, "when they must go forward . . . if they wish to avoid decadence and a lamentable end." The public, however, did not respond, and the Sovereign was faced with the necessity of buying most of the shares left on the market. The situation was becoming desperate. All expenses had been drastically reduced at Court. Leopold's health seemed affected by his business anxieties, but his purpose remained clear. "According to my duty, I do not pursue any selfish aim," he wrote at that time. "I wish only to enlarge the field of national activity and to extend it to a new and larger sphere, in which our industrialists

should never meet with the obstacle of prohibitive tariffs. What I have sought in Africa and what I shall find there if I am followed is, besides the progress of civilization, more work for our industries and, consequently, for our large industrial population."

The people were not prepared to listen to such arguments, however sincere and patriotic. They were far more deeply stirred by the eloquent predications which Cardinal Lavignerie was making throughout Europe against the cruelty of slave-traders, which provoked the gathering of an International Conference in Brussels in November 1889 under the presidency of Lamermont. While the diplomats of seventeen nations were deliberating, the news reached Leopold that Stanley had achieved another success in rescuing Emin Pasha from the Mahdists, on the Upper Nile. Everything was prepared to give the explorer a Royal welcome in the capital and the honours showered upon him gave a new prestige to the African enterprise. Besides, the Anti-Slavery Conference had had some practical results. In order to further the civilizing work undertaken in the Congo basin, the Independent State was authorized to charge a tax of 10 per cent. *ad valorem* on all imported goods. This new measure necessitated the revision of Article IV of the Berlin Act, which denied the Association the faculty of raising any tariff for a period of twenty years.

The tide had evidently turned. The King was now in a position to offer certain guarantees. On July 2nd, 1890, Beernaert succeeded in obtaining from Parliament a loan of twenty-five millions, and a few days later he read to the Chamber a "testament" written by Leopold, in which he left to Belgium "all his rights" over the Congo, together with all the "possessions and privileges deriving from these rights." In a letter to the Prime Minister accompanying the will, the Sovereign added that "if, before his death,

Belgium wished to tighten the bonds which attached her to the Congo, . . . he would be glad to see her take full possession of it (*de l'en voir en pleine jouissance*)."

Never before, since the Middle Ages, had sovereignty been transferred in this way from an individual to a nation. The loan was payable in ten yearly instalments, so that Belgium might choose, in 1899, either to annex the Congo or to receive repayment of the capital. This would lead necessarily to further advances. The fate of the Mother Country and of her future colony were henceforth linked together financially as well as politically. The success of the railway seemed practically assured.

6

From that moment, remarks Pirenne, Leopold seems to lose the "sense of possibilities" which had served him so well in the past. "Certain of being able to cope with the most pressing necessities, he allows his ambition to carry him away. He forgets the humanitarian idealism which allowed him to create *his* Congo. He wishes now to carve for himself an Empire and to find in it the resources necessary for its expansion." He is still working for Belgium, but he denies his country, or any other, the right to control his actions. He loads himself with new responsibilities and launches a number of enterprises far above his resources. Like most empire-builders before him, he has reached the stage when the pioneer gives way to the conqueror. The contrast between the constitutional Sovereign of Belgium and the absolute monarch of the Congo State becomes every year more striking.

Temporary financial security does not alone explain this change. Leopold's temper had altered since the death of

his son. It hardened under the repeated blows of destiny. In January 1889 Archduke Rudolf von Hapsburg, to whom he had married his eldest daughter Stéphanie, committed suicide at Mayerling with his mistress Marie Vetsera. The next year the castle of Laeken was burnt down and the governess of Princess Clémentine perished in the flames. Many of the Sovereign's treasures were destroyed, among them the only pictures he possessed of the Count of Hainault. A few months later, in January 1891, his nephew Baudouin, who was twenty-two years old, died suddenly from influenza. The King had gradually become very fond of the brilliant and popular young Prince who was destined to succeed him, and it was whispered that he hoped to marry him to his favourite daughter Clémentine. He learnt the tragic news on his return from Laeken, where he had gone to lay a wreath on the tomb of his son. It seemed as if an evil fate were dogging his steps, that all his affections must end in disaster. Work alone remained. In Belgium the military reform for which he was striving was indefinitely shelved. But in the Congo he was at least able to pursue his activity with a feverish resolve born of thwarted hopes. Fate challenged him; he would fight against fate.

All circumstances seemed to lure him in the same direction and to favour his imperialism. The Upper Congo and the region of Lake Tanganyika were still in the hands of the Arab slave-traders. In order to fulfil the humanitarian mission he had undertaken, the Sovereign of the new State was obliged to organize a native mercenary force under the command of Belgian officers, and to wage a regular war lasting over two years against Tippo Tip and his lieutenants. But all his expeditions were not essentially concerned with the abolition of slavery. He had not given up the plan of establishing himself across Central Africa, from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. The road to Zanzibar was now

blocked by the Germans, who had established their rights over Dar-es-Salaam. Other issues might be found further south or further north towards the Zambesi or towards the Nile. In the latter direction, Leopold's efforts led to the conclusion of the 1894 Convention with the British Government, through which, in exchange for a strip of land connecting Lake Albert with Lake Tanganyika, he obtained practically the whole of the Bahr-el-Ghazal.

This convention had soon to be modified under French and German pressure, but the King remained obsessed with the dream of linking the Congo with the Nile and, if possible, with the East Coast. He thought at one time of concluding an alliance with the Negus and creating an "Empire of the Congo and Abyssinia." As he expressed it, he did not wish to "put all his eggs in the same basket." He had already thought of Morocco. He was soon to think of China and even of the Philippines. His imagination knew no bounds, but his means were limited.

The Belgian loan might have paid for the railway; it could not defray the cost of the Arab campaigns and a score of expeditions sent in all directions in the hope of enlarging the territory of the State. Neither did the tax on imports yield the necessary profits. The railway could not be finished for several years. Some way had to be found to bridge the gap. The decree of September 21st, 1891, "reserved" natural products—mostly ivory and rubber—in all vacant lands, which included nearly the whole territory, and the natives were compelled to pay a tax in kind. Through a bitter irony of fate, the suppression of slavery had brought about the introduction of forced labour.

Neither Banning nor Lambermont could agree with a measure which was not consistent with the Berlin Act. It gave practically a monopoly to the Administration, and must lead to abuses owing to the difficulty of supervising subor-

dinate agents in such vast possessions. The Sovereign was impatient of his collaborators' criticism. He was in the position of an inventor whose genius is stifled by lack of money. The Congo had become a gulf into which he had thrown not only his personal fortune but also the revenues of the Civil List. Exposed to the attacks of companies who had hoped to obtain concessions in the "reserved" territories, unable to support alone his enormous financial liabilities, he consented at last to listen to the advice of those who urged an immediate annexation of the Congo State by Belgium. In January 1895 he approved a bill placing the "colony" under parliamentary control. Had this measure been adopted, none of the difficulties and abuses which followed would have occurred, and the criticisms levelled at the Administration would have been short-lived.

7

The first result of the revision of the Constitution had been practically to eliminate the Liberal Party, which, at the 1894 elections, had only obtained 14 seats, against the Socialists' 34 and the Catholics' 104. The majority enjoyed by the latter, which, although considerably reduced, was maintained until the end of the reign, prevented the Sovereign from taking advantage of political rivalries in order to further his policy. Besides, the attacks of the Opposition against the monarchy prompted the King to lean towards the Right. He could not compromise with the Socialist republicans or with their "Radical" allies. He found, in the Catholic ministers who succeeded Beernaert at the head of the Government, men prepared to leave him a free hand in his colonial enterprise provided he did not embarrass them with unpopular defensive measures.

The project of annexation of 1895 came before the Chamber at a time when public opinion was absorbed by internal affairs. The Catholic Cabinet had provoked the Socialists by passing a law increasing the privileges of the *censitaire* voters in communal elections, and exasperated the Liberals by introducing a measure making religious teaching obligatory in State schools, unless the parents objected. The atmosphere was unfavourable to a discussion of the colonial problem. Taking advantage of these delays and of the objections raised in Parliament, Leopold withdrew his proposal and notified his Prime Minister that he intended to continue to assume full responsibility for the Congo Administration.

This sudden change of attitude is generally attributed to the fact that, owing to the high price of rubber, the financial position had become much easier. In fact, the Congo had begun to pay, and it was already evident that, after the completion of the railway, the enterprise would become exceedingly prosperous.

There was another reason which has generally been overlooked. Félix Faure, the King's personal friend, had become President of the French Republic. His support might become invaluable in order to modify the attitude of France, which had been the main obstacle to the conquest of the Bahr-el-Ghazal. The withdrawal of the project of annexation coincides with the organization of an important expedition under Dhanis, the conqueror of the Arabs, which started for the Upper Nile in 1896, anticipating the initiative taken a few months later by the French Colonel Marchand, which led to the Fashoda incident. No Belgian Government could have sanctioned such a bold scheme, with its international implications. Leopold was not yet ready to hand over the direction of affairs to timid Belgian ministers. He wished to enlarge his possessions before offering them to his

country. He had even conceived the project of obtaining the lease of a part of Eritrea from Italy for a *Société congolaise de Colonisation et d'Exploitation*. Dhanis was prevented from reaching his objective owing to the revolt of his troops, and a new military campaign was needed to suppress the rebel Batetelas. Finally, the victory of Omdurman, in 1898, brought back the Sudan within the British sphere of influence and prevented further conquests in the direction of the Nile.

8

The fact is that Leopold had the greatest difficulty in doing, after fifteen years' ceaseless work, what he had originally intended to do: hand over the control of "his Congo" to the Belgian Government. He remained loyal to the promise made in his will, but he could only reluctantly accept the idea that the colony should be administered by others and that he should become an "adviser" where he had been an absolute monarch. Barring a few exceptions, he had a poor opinion of politicians, and he feared the consequences of the annexation, or the *reprise*, as it was called. His ministers had some experience of Belgian affairs, but could they cope with the thousand difficulties which would confront them in an undeveloped country? Could they take at once the necessary decisions and face parliamentary criticism in the Congo, when they did not even succeed in obtaining from their majority the reorganization of Belgian defences? The Sovereign believed that the system of taxation which he had introduced in Africa was indispensable to the financial stability of his possessions, and that the reforms already urged by certain members of the Opposition would bring his efforts to naught. He was convinced, by the attitude of Parliament in 1895, that the

country was not ready to assume the government of the future colony. He was also convinced that the Congo was not yet sufficiently developed and organized to become a Belgian possession. He had created this enormous empire alone, out of nothing. He had sacrificed to it the best years of his life and the greater part of his fortune. Was it going to be torn from his grasp and perhaps wrecked through timidity or mismanagement at the very moment when it was beginning to bear fruit?

These apprehensions were no doubt increased by personal feeling, but they were not groundless. It is difficult to decide to-day whether the transfer of authority from the Crown to Parliament would have been as successful in 1895 as it was twelve years later.

Meanwhile the Sovereign pursued his vast schemes at the expense of his African possessions. In 1897 he enlisted the services of Emile Francqui, who had distinguished himself during the Arab campaigns, and whom he sent to China in order to secure the concession of the Peking-Hankow railway, the starting-point of a number of Belgian enterprises in the Far East. He was determined to leave behind him large monuments which would commemorate his prosperous reign in his own country. From the revenue of a vast private *domaine* which he had created for this purpose in Africa, he began to build a number of palaces, castles, avenues and triumphal arches which transformed the aspect of Brussels and its surroundings, and left their mark upon Ostend and various sites of the Ardennes. All these works were destined to return to the State after his death. In this, as in other things, he remained sincerely convinced that he was working for the good of the Belgian people and for the "greatness" of Belgium.

The worst consequence of the prolongation of the Sovereign's personal rule in Africa was the campaign

directed against his administration in Belgium and abroad. A discussion of the violent accusations made at the time does not come within the scope of this work. It is generally recognized to-day that the report of the International Commission of Enquiry sent to the Congo in 1904 gives a fairly accurate account of the situation. A comparison between the Commissioners' findings and the denunciations of the Congo Reform Association and of Roger Casement, British Consul at Boma, whose reports appeared at the same time, shows that the evidence which exerted such a strong influence upon public opinion was not reliable, and that the campaign against the "Congo atrocities" was not merely inspired by disinterested humanitarian motives.

Even before the introduction of forced labour, the Sovereign had been exposed to attacks in the Belgian and foreign Press, inspired by private companies who had been refused concessions, or by dismissed agents who wished to avenge themselves for the "unfair" treatment they had received. Enemies of the Congo Administration, and their number grew tenfold when it became a profit-making concern, were not slow to realize that if public opinion were to be aroused, more particularly in England, the Sovereign would be placed in a very awkward situation. The economic system of the possession was no longer in accordance with the strict interpretation of the treaties, and foreign intervention might bring about fatal complications. Leopold was subjected, on several occasions, to attempts at blackmail, one of which was punished by the British Courts.*

From the first, the Sovereign was thus inclined to consider every attack made against his regime as emanating from jealous competitors or personal enemies. In private instructions sent to the head of his Administration, Baron van Eetvelde, as early as 1896, he wrote: "We wish to do

* Captain Burrows, tried in 1902.

good. If evil were done in our possessions, our duty would be to suppress it, but we cannot acknowledge as trustworthy the reports of dismissed agents . . .” He relied too much on his Administration. Being unable to go to Africa himself, he had no personal knowledge of actual conditions, and was disinclined to send a Commission of Enquiry at an earlier date because this action might “justify” the gross criticisms directed against him. This was perhaps his gravest fault. Had the Commissioners started a few months earlier, he would have been in a far better position to answer Casement’s accusations. Working on maps and official reports in Brussels, he had become entirely dependent on agents, who, while generally faithful, were not inclined to cause trouble to themselves or their colleagues by revealing unpalatable truths.

Speaking of the introduction of forced labour in 1891, de Lichtervelde remarks that the Sovereign’s error was “the transforming into a system that which, in any case, should have been a temporary expedient.” Every month provoked new abuses and added fuel to the fire of protests. The exploitation went on even after the opening of the railway between Matadi and Leopoldville, in 1898, even after exports had risen from ten million francs, in 1895, to fifty-four millions, in 1901. The King could not, or would not, admit that, besides the manœuvres of enemies inspired by interested motives, he was also faced with the opposition of sincere men who disagreed with his interpretation of the Berlin Act and with his high-handed methods. In May 1903 the British Parliament registered its protest and sent a note to the Powers suggesting that steps should be taken to obtain prompt reforms. The next year, after the publication of the Casement report, a new debate in the House provoked a declaration from Sir Edward Grey: the British Government had decided to interfere.

By that time the idea of the *reprise* had made considerable progress in Belgium. Two years previously, Beernaert, who no longer shared the King's views, had proposed it. The leader of the Right had opposed the measure and had received, on this occasion, a grateful letter from the Sovereign. "Belgium is not ready," he wrote, "and is not capable of replacing at the moment the present Administration . . . I have spontaneously given Belgium the faculty to possess the Congo, and because to-day I warn her loyally that it would not be to her advantage to annex the Congo . . . and that she would have to bear the heavy expense of completing the economic development of the territories, I am treated as a suspect, as an enemy"*

It soon appeared, however, that there was no alternative but annexation or foreign interference. Long negotiations, begun in 1907, were finally completed in September 1908. The King, bound by his early promise, could not pursue his resistance. He tried to preserve his *domaine* which had become the *Fondation de la Couronne*, but Belgian opinion was now determined to reap the full benefit of the Sovereign's efforts and to bring the whole territory under parliamentary control. The Congo was at last considered as a national enterprise to which Belgium had sacrificed many of her children. Besides, diplomatic negotiations were being pursued with England, concerning commercial freedom, and with France, concerning the "right of preference," and the Government wished to have a free hand in these transactions. With a bitter heart the old King drafted the following *testament*, in November 1907, during those painful discussions: "I have inherited fifteen millions from my parents . . . I possess nothing else. After my death, these fifteen millions will be the property of my heirs . . . to be divided between them . . . I wish to be buried in the early morning,

* Letter to Charles Woeste, June 9th, 1901.

without any pomp. Apart from my nephew Albert and my Household I forbid anyone to follow my remains."

9

Leopold had become completely estranged from his family. Like many aristocrats of his generation, he combined the activities of a keen business man with the hard principles of his caste. In one way he was a pioneer, a man of the twentieth century; in another he was a conservative, a man of the eighteenth. He had the financier's impatience for legal restrictions and the aristocrat's scorn for a misalliance. He had not met his eldest daughter Stéphanie, the widow of Archduke Rudolf, after her second marriage with the Count of Lonyay, and had quarrelled with his second daughter Louise, whose marriage with Prince Philip of Saxe-Coburg had ended miserably. At the same time his own private life was not above reproach and his frequent and prolonged absences in France, where he had acquired several residences, provoked a good deal of gossip. When the Queen died in Spa, in September 1902, the King refused to see the Countess of Lonyay, who had come to her mother's death-bed. Two years later he opposed, for political reasons, the marriage of his youngest daughter Clémentine with Prince Napoleon. He had by that time a *faux ménage* of his own and the notorious Baroness Vaughan's presence at Laeken caused further comment.

"Congo atrocities" and private scandal provided useful material for republican propaganda, and the Socialist Press exploited this opportunity to the full. But Leopold's hardness towards his own family was perhaps the worst grievance in the eyes of the Belgians. Had the Sovereign shown more indulgence towards others, his own failings

might have been overlooked. People could not understand the gulf which separated, according to him, private affairs, which did not concern the country, and public marriages, which involved Belgian political interests. As the wave of unpopularity grew stronger and stronger, Leopold ceased even to safeguard appearances. Those who would have overlooked his weaknesses could not forgive him his pride.

While the cortège followed his body through the capital, on December 22nd, 1909, the attitude of the crowd was scarcely respectful. The police did not succeed in preventing pedlars from shouting the titles of libellous pamphlets and exhibiting gross caricatures. Leopold, who had been shocked at certain disorders which had taken place at Prince Baudouin's funeral, had remarked: "This will not happen after my death." It had been, unfortunately, impossible to comply with his wishes for a strictly private burial. He had also said: "I shall be happy if justice is rendered to me twenty years after I am gone." This hope, at least, was realized. Immediately after the War the reaction went perhaps too far and some writers were inclined to hail, in the great old monarch, the stern realist, the man of action, the type of super-patriot who stirred the imagination of the younger generation in those days.

It is difficult to speak in the name of History or to lay down the law about opinions which may be held in future years. Besides, these opinions are themselves likely to fluctuate according to the trend of political feeling. There are nevertheless a few considerations which may help us to form a sound judgement of Leopold's strong and complex personality.

As a man, he undoubtedly possessed genius. Like almost all those who exert their genius in the domain of reality, he could not always keep his power under control. He was induced again and again to attempt the impossible and to

take unnecessary moral as well as material risks. He had all the qualities and the defects of strength: vision, patience, tireless energy, but also ruthlessness. He was, however, as hard with himself as with others, and could discard a friend, if not without a qualm at least without hesitation. Everything had to bow not before his will, but before his high purpose.

As a King, he certainly belonged to the class of those who "achieve greatness." It is very doubtful whether the most popular constitutional monarch could have done more than he did in strengthening Belgian defences. His work in Africa is unique in history. It can only be compared with the impulse given to colonial expansion by some Princes of the Renaissance, such as Henry of Portugal—with this notable difference: that, instead of encouraging the initiatives of his subjects, he created them. For fifteen years he struggled against the tide. He may be said to have thrust his royal gift upon an unwilling people. If the wisdom of the means he used to achieve his end may be questioned, the absolute disinterestedness of this end cannot be doubted. The best words which could be chosen as Leopold II's epitaph are those which he addressed to his Prime Minister five days before his death: "In all I have done I have had no other purpose than the good of Belgium."

CHAPTER X

LIBERALISM, EXPANSION AND THE WAR

BELGIAN writers are fond of repeating that their country is the "microcosm of Europe." Owing to her central position between England, France and Germany, Belgium is exposed to outside influences and is particularly fitted to assimilate them. Formed by the collaboration of two races expressing themselves in two distinct languages, the one Latin in its origin, the other Germanic, she possesses many of the characteristics of her neighbours. She is not without originality, but her originality is not self-evident as is that of the great countries which surround her. It is to a great extent the result of the combination of the various economic and intellectual currents which meet in the Belgian plain. The Scheldt comes from France, but its estuary is also the natural outlet of the Rhineland and it faces the Thames. Antwerp is essentially a port of transit, and the country owes a great deal of its prosperity to transit trade. Brussels is a centre of French literature and German music. Belgian modern art has been subjected to French and English influences. These international features were already evident in the XVth century, when Belgian civilization flourished under the rule of the Dukes of Burgundy. They appeared again as soon as, under an independent régime, the country was once more able to play her part in the world.

Most of the economic and social changes to which Europe was subjected during the nineteenth century are thus reflected in Belgian modern history. Owing to the small

size of the country, they appear more strongly defined than elsewhere—almost summarized.

The first period, from 1830 to 1885, is the era of Liberalism. Political life is limited to the bourgeoisie enjoying the restricted franchise granted by the Constitution. State interference is excluded, on principle, as a symptom of absolutism; freedom is favoured indiscriminately, whether it applies to religion, politics or economic competition and labour conditions. Law enjoys an unprecedented prestige as the interpreter of national order. Even in international transactions, the advantages resulting from the Balance of Power induce respect of treaties, more particularly of the treaties establishing Belgian neutrality and preventing any nation from seizing the key position in Europe. At home, the development of a number of small industries does not seriously affect the equilibrium between rural and urban life. Social unrest does not threaten the foundations of the State. Leopold I is essentially the Sovereign of the Liberal period. His main task, while respecting the Constitution, is to preserve Belgian security by strengthening the army and using his influence in order to prevent conflicts which might endanger Belgian frontiers. He is, first of all, a statesman and a diplomat, a man of his time, content to exercise his exceptional talent in dealing with problems with which he was confronted, far too prudent to stir up new ones which it might be difficult or impossible to solve.

The second period, from 1885 to 1914, may be called the era of Expansion. It is a twofold expansion, social and economic. It witnesses the rise of Socialism, the extension of the franchise to the whole population, the introduction of social reforms and State interference. At one and the same time, a new class of capitalists are transforming methods of production and distribution and seeking new markets—if possible, privileged markets—in distant lands. "Never has

the power of business men and financiers been so great," remarks Pirenne, "than since the day when they lost the right to determine labour conditions." The progress of technical methods provokes the development of international trusts, on the one side, and international Labour on the other. The balance between industry and agriculture is upset. While, in 1846, 50 per cent. of the Belgians resided in the country, in 1900 the proportion is reduced to less than a quarter. This is due mainly to an enormous increase in the population. Within the last half of the century, its density rises from 147 per square kilometre to 227. Although richer than ever, agricultural production is no longer sufficient to meet national needs. In 1890 over half the corn consumed comes from abroad. Belgium depends now on her exports which, in 1900, are proportionately larger than in any other country: 30 per cent. of the industrial production, against 25 per cent. in England. Through her small cost of production and her low cost of living, she rises to the fifth rank among all the trading nations—a position out of all proportion with her area and population.

The development of great industries and powerful limited companies extends the field of competition to the world market. In no country is the change more staggering in its results. Within ten years Belgian foreign enterprises, hitherto practically negligible, acquired first-rate importance. The movement starts in Poland and southern Russia in 1886, reaches Spain and Morocco, and soon extends to Brazil and the Argentine Republic, in the West, and China, in the East.

This sudden transformation, which might be considered as a second industrial revolution, had been clearly foreseen by Leopold II. Living in an age of transition, astride between the Liberal era and the era of Expansion, he could not afford to await events. He had to take the lead to make up for lost time and lost opportunities. In the Congo alone the

number of companies in which Belgian capital is engaged rises from 175, in 1890, to 3,500, in 1913. In 1914 the amount of Belgian capital invested abroad is estimated at 7,000 million francs.* Nothing shows more clearly the "expansionist" character of the King's economic policy than the negotiations he pursued in China in order to obtain railway concessions, more particularly that of the trunk line from Peking to Hankow, which was finally granted, in 1898, to a Belgo-French syndicate. Leopold deals with the Chinese Government through the official Belgian representatives, but he interferes also personally as Sovereign of the Congo, and uses part of the revenue of his African *domaine* to promote the enterprise. His notes and instructions reveal his constant preoccupation of keeping in Belgian hands the larger share of the capital, and to give the benefit of the undertaking to Belgian labour and industry. The Congo will always be associated with his name, but the future colony formed only one part of his grandiose scheme, which was to give Belgium, a late-comer in international competition, a share in the world trade, and to break the barrier which had hitherto prevented her from competing with other great industrial countries on distant markets. In his Chinese negotiations he succeeded in turning the weakness of his kingdom to advantage, for Belgium could not be suspected, like her powerful competitors, of hiding political ambitions under the veil of financial enterprises.

The more we consider the problems with which Belgium was faced in 1885-1890, the more value we attach to the bold initiative taken by her King before those years. No doubt economic expansion would have taken place in any circumstances, but it might not have come in time to prevent a dangerous social crisis, or it might have been paralysed by powerful competition. Prosperity was the

* F. Baudhouin, in *Histoire de la Belgique contemporaine*.

only remedy against agitation, the only alternative to a social revolution which would have threatened national independence. Leopold II has been called a "great business man" by those who place statesmanship above financial ability. Like his father, he was representative of his time, but he had this singular merit of foreseeing the tidal wave of Capitalism which was to rise over Europe at the end of the last century, and to see that Belgium benefited from it. The movement itself was beyond his control. He happened to be particularly gifted to join in it, but even if he had not been, he would have felt compelled by circumstances to face the necessity of discovering new markets and fresh sources of raw material.

The danger of revolution which threatened during the 1886 riots, and later at the time of the 1894 revision, might have proved fatal to Belgium if her Sovereign had not succeeded in obtaining for her material advantages which were deemed unnecessary by some of her ablest political leaders.

Against these material advantages must be placed the marked decline of law and order at home and abroad during the last years of the reign. The first springs from the growing opposition between the Catholic Government and the Socialists, increased by the unpopularity of the Sovereign who is no longer considered an impartial arbiter between parties. The second derives from circumstances affecting the whole of Europe, such as the weakening of the British guarantee already noticeable in 1887, and the new grouping of the Powers into two rival coalitions. The five guarantors of Belgian neutrality are now virtually divided into two opposite camps: France, Russia and England, on one side, Germany and Austria on the other. The very successes which crowned Leopold's efforts in the economic and colonial fields increase the danger by awakening foreign jealousies and ambitions. The military weakness of the

country which he had laboured hard to prevent is another source of insecurity. Belgium is no longer considered as the "Keystone of Europe," as in 1840, or as the best safeguard of general peace, as in 1871; she has become for some a dubious potential ally, for others a rich and easy prey, the first-fruit of a policy of aggression, the essential conditions of European hegemony. All the forces which had promoted the establishment of Belgian neutrality in 1831 and its consolidation in 1848 and 1870 were on the wane. The prestige of treaties decreased with the new impulse given to national ambitions by expansionism. World-industrialized Europe was drifting towards the World War.

Leopold's young nephew accepted a heavy heritage. He came to the throne five years before the catastrophe, at a time when clouds were already darkening the horizon. He had no particular ability for statesmanship or business. Having been kept away from public affairs, he possessed no experience of the stupendous difficulties with which he was suddenly confronted at home and abroad. There is a saying that "Coburgs develop late." He was perhaps the only member of the dynasty to whom it may be applied. According to outward appearances at least, he possessed in his youth none of the qualities which had distinguished his predecessors, showing no sign of precocity or wilfulness. He was shy, slow-moving, slow-speaking, remarkably modest in his manner and delivery. Only his intimates knew the reserves of strength and single-mindedness which lay behind this calm simplicity. Unlike Leopold I and Leopold II, Albert I was not typical of his time. He would have been exceptional in any period of history. To the cynics of the twentieth century, he appeared almost eccentric. He was that extraordinary phenomenon, a public man who is not a "man of the world," a strictly sincere statesman applying in public affairs the moral principles which inspire

his private life, ignorant of mental reservations, astuteness and compromise—reserved, tactful, but whenever he spoke or acted, meaning exactly what he said and did, true not only to others but to himself. There was a time when such men were called saints, there may be a time when they will be called fools. Their appearance on the world stage is disturbing and fraught with trouble. They do not fit into the general scheme of things. They are neither stern realists nor exalted idealists; they ask from life neither less nor more than it can give. They follow a far more difficult course, taking the world as they find it, and fulfilling their duty with an almost naïve scrupulousness, without a thought for the profit or loss which their actions may bring to them.

The fact that Belgium found in her first two Sovereigns statesmen whose wide intelligence and remarkable energy succeeded in consolidating her situation and defending her interests, is sufficiently astonishing, but the accession of King Albert, in 1909, appears almost providential in the light of later events. Neither diplomacy nor prosperity could help Belgium during the storm which was brewing. The inequality between her forces and those of her future enemies was so flagrant, the sacrifices involved by her resistance so appalling, that, as the saying goes, nothing short of a miracle could have saved her. It was, indeed, a complex miracle, but its main feature was the presence in Brussels, in August 1914, of a quiet, honest man who attached more importance to moral values for himself and for his people than to any power or wealth which might ever be his or theirs. For no power could solve the problem before which the country was placed, no diplomacy could avoid a straight answer to a crooked demand, no wealth could buy peace when peace meant shame. When everything seemed lost, an exceptional situation required an exceptional man. When everything seemed lost, moral prestige alone was left.

CHAPTER XI

BEFORE THE ORDEAL

I

PRINCE ALBERT ascended the throne during the most critical period of Belgian history. Four years before, his dream of world hegemony had lead William II to pursue a policy hostile not only to France but also to Great Britain, and the tension provoked by the Algeciras crisis had recently been increased by the Anglo-Russian *rapprochement*. All attempts at conciliation seemed doomed to failure, and a European conflict appeared unavoidable. The internal situation was scarcely more favourable. The feud between Liberals and Catholics was fiercer than ever. Although trade unions and co-operatives were now richer and more powerful, the Socialists had lost nothing of their extremist tendencies and openly proclaimed that they only used constitutional means in order to achieve social revolution. For the first time in history, following the introduction of general suffrage, the language question loomed on the horizon. After obtaining a series of reforms which had been too long delayed, the Flemings wished to ostracize French from Flanders and to reform the linguistic régime in the army and the central administration. Class prejudice embittered the conflict in the Flemish provinces, where the French-speaking minority, belonging almost entirely to the bourgeoisie, resisted the popular demands of the peasants led by the village priests. The Walloons themselves, long

indifferent to the conflict, became restless, and some of them manifested separatist tendencies. The Executive was weakened by the unpopularity of the Catholic Government which had ruled over the country since 1884, and by the estrangement between Crown and people which had taken place during the last years of the previous reign. Public demonstrations became more and more frequent and appeals to violence were heard in Parliament and in the Press.

These symptoms of disintegration provoked a good deal of comment abroad. They undermined confidence in England and France, and fostered in Germany the hope that Belgium could not oppose any resistance to a determined assault. They encouraged racial and linguistic fanaticism among the pan-Germanists, who extended their claims to Flanders and Antwerp, and published maps including Holland and Flanders in Greater Germany. Once more, Belgium was represented as an "artificial State," a "creation of European diplomacy." In order to demonstrate that the nation was "scientifically non-existent," German publicists used the same arguments which French writers in the pay of Napoleon had employed fifty years before. Ignoring Switzerland and other mixed nationalities, they stated as a dogma that national unity could only be founded on "race" or "language." They did not explain what they meant by "race" or by "language," and carefully avoided stating with any precision how a pure racial type could be preserved through successive generations, or to what extent languages derived from the same origin could be assimilated in one large family. They found in the peculiar character of the Belgian State an argument to justify their territorial ambitions and used it, with effect, for all it was worth.

Without undue optimism, the young King faced calmly the difficulties of his task. Being powerless to alter the course of European developments, he concentrated his energy on strengthening the Belgian forces and in fostering tolerance and understanding among his people. He knew that the obstacles which confronted him at home were due to temporary circumstances, and did not seriously affect national unity. The latter was founded on a long-standing tradition which had brought together the various principalities of the Low Countries for the common defence of their privileges and independence. In spite of their racial or linguistic differences, Flemings and Walloons had joined forces against foreign intrusion since the Middle Ages. Notwithstanding their religious and political outlook, they had rebelled together against Spain in the sixteenth century, against Austria in the eighteenth, and against Holland in the nineteenth. They fought each other as long as they thought themselves safe, but at once united against a common enemy as soon as their *commune patrie* was in danger. Such quarrels were family quarrels and did not endanger the foundation of the State. Their very fierceness was a proof of vitality and showed that unity need not be artificially protected at the expense of freedom. Socialism and the Flemish question were merely the result of the revision of the Constitution and of the advent of democracy. The Flemish peasants and the Walloon industrial workers clamoured for their rights, as the old Liberal and Catholic parties had struggled for supremacy. The transition might be difficult, but it was only a transition.

The unpopularity of Leopold II did not show that the Belgians had suddenly renounced their monarchist traditions

or had forgotten the services rendered to the country by the dynasty. It showed merely that Leopold, absorbed by his grandiose projects, had gradually lost touch with the people, and had ceased to appear to them as the arbiter between parties, the symbol of their common land. Long before his successor's accession, they had transferred to him the feelings of loyalty which they could no longer express to the old monarch.

This popularity had grown ever since Prince Albert had become heir to the throne, after the death of his brother Baudouin, in 1891. It had a modest beginning, first at the Military School, later in the army. It increased considerably when it was heard that the Prince took a keen interest in social questions and inspected the principal workshops of the country in order to acquire a personal knowledge of the workers' conditions. He appeared in the mines of Liège and Hainaut, dressed as a miner, drove the engine of his train and rode a motor-cycle, travelling most of the time *incognito* and behaving to employers and workmen with the same consideration and simplicity. In 1905 he accepted the dedication of a pamphlet written by one of his old masters entitled *Socialisme et Monarchie*, and it was well known that he was strongly influenced in his views by Ernest Solvay, the founder of the *Institut sociologique*, who defended the principle of the "equality of the starting point." When he came back from his long journey to the United States in 1908, his uncle declared laughingly that he had been converted to Socialism.

What the Prince felt instinctively was that the economic problem was fast becoming the dominating factor in politics. Like Leopold, he realized the future importance of the African colony and the necessity of perfecting the country's industrial equipment, but he was equally interested in the condition of the worker. The problem was moral

as well as material. Class hatred was not only fostered by poor wages and long hours but also by snobbery and prejudice. The Prince had a healthy distrust of theories, but he was keenly sensitive to social injustice. He was a *démophile* more than a democrat, and his love for the poor sprang from an admiration for their patience and fortitude. This genuine sympathy was immediately felt and appreciated.

As early as 1905, after the death of the Count of Flanders, a discussion took place in the Chamber regarding the Civil List to be voted to the heir to the throne. The Opposition showed remarkable moderation, a number of deputies explaining that their vote was not inspired by any personal hostility towards the Prince. One of the Socialist leaders pronounced his eulogy, declaring that "he was preparing himself conscientiously for the position which he was destined to occupy"—a striking declaration, coming from a republican.

3

The definite change came in 1900, at the time of the marriage of Prince Albert with Princess Elisabeth, Duchess of Bavaria. If the Belgians are critical and undisciplined, they are also highly sentimental. Like the English, they like to consider the Royal family as the type of the national family. They take a long time to appreciate the efficiency or the foresight of their Princes, but they respond at once to their homely virtues. A happy home is almost a condition of popularity under a constitutional and democratic regime. A king need not be a great statesman, but he must be a good husband and a kind father. Historians may criticize this tendency, but it is nevertheless a fact which cannot be over-

looked and which may exert a strong influence on politics. One of the main causes of Leopold's unpopularity had been his unhappy marriage and the severity he had shown to his daughters. Under his rule, public sentiment had been starved. For the first time since the death of Queen Louise-Marie, it found a welcome relief in the news that the engagement between the Prince and his Princess was the result of a chance meeting in the Alps, and had nothing to do with politics or diplomacy. Popular imagination was stirred by the description of Possenhofen and of the simple and homely life led by Duke Charles-Théodore, of Bavaria, and his family. The Duke was a distinguished oculist; his daughter helped him in his hospital as a nurse. She was fond of music, painting and literature. This was enough to encourage the hope that the future Sovereigns would no longer stand aloof from their people.

It had been feared that the arrival of Albert and Elisabeth in Brussels might be marred by republican demonstrations. It was, however, nothing short of a triumph. During the next nine years their popularity grew stronger and stronger. Every one of their actions was hailed with enthusiasm and somewhat unfairly contrasted with the old King's remoteness. The Prince pursued his studies and his travels. During four months spent in the Congo he inspected the colony, paying particular attention to the condition of the natives and to the results achieved by the new Administration. Taking long journeys on foot, sleeping under canvas and visiting distant stations, he insisted on checking official reports by personal inspection. The Princess showed the same devotion to public interest by initiating children's welfare centres in the poorest quarters of the capital, and encouraging the efforts of charity organizations throughout the country. She made a habit of inviting distinguished guests, who lunched informally at the Palace, not only statesmen and officers but also

scientists, writers, musicians and artists. There had been, since 1890, a strong revival of Belgian literature, and writers like Lemonnier, Verhaeren and Maeterlinck had been appreciated abroad. Their success, however, had scarcely been recognized in Brussels. Thanks to the Princess's initiative, the prejudice against national literature was gradually dispelled and Belgian writers and artists obtained the consideration they deserved. They were touched by the interest shown to them by their hosts and by the simple cordiality with which they were greeted, and found many opportunities of expressing their gratitude. Thus, in an unobtrusive and natural way, the barriers which existed between Court and people were broken one by one. The birth of Prince Leopold in 1901, Prince Charles in 1903, and Princess Marie-José in 1906 strengthened and confirmed this feeling of kinship. The picture of the happy family, so dear to Belgian hearts, was completed.

4

King Albert's accession speech contains a few sentences which reflect clearly his intentions. He insisted on the Sovereign's duty to "stand above parties" and of "watching with solicitude" over the humblest of his subjects. He spoke of the necessity of "raising the intellectual and moral standard of the nation" and of "improving the material conditions of the masses." He added that only "the moral and intellectual forces of a country can render its prosperity fruitful," and that the writers and artists of the Flemish and Walloon provinces had a great part to play in Belgian history.

His predecessor had repeatedly warned his subjects that "prosperity was not enough," when he wished to open their eyes to the danger of invasion and to induce them to make

the necessary sacrifices to ensure the country's security. Albert I, or—as he preferred to call himself—Albert of Belgium, struck a new note. He proclaimed the danger of a purely materialistic outlook. Above the economic structure, stood the nation's scientific and artistic activity, which should lead to a nobler conception of citizenship. Prosperity was not enough if, through mismanagement or class selfishness, the majority of the people were compelled to lead a miserable existence, or if the nation had no other ambition than to increase indefinitely its wealth and material comfort. These words were generally accepted as a platonic wish. The King's life proved that they meant much more for him, and that he was determined to do all in his power to prove them true.

What the young Sovereign did not perhaps realize at the time was that by following this programme he was using the best means of restoring the prestige of the Crown and strengthening national unity. While aware of the danger of a European war and the necessity of increasing Belgian forces, he could not but foresee that the preservation of the country's independence depended as much on the attitude of the civil population as on that of the soldiers. It was urgent to arm, it was equally urgent to close the social ranks and to attenuate internal disputes, so that the nation might oppose a common front to the enemy after the invasion. The fact that the Belgian army escaped annihilation during the first months of the conflict was entirely due to the King's generalship, but he contributed also largely to the success of the civil resistance by the wisdom which he showed in the management of internal affairs during the first five years of his reign.

Plural voting, introduced at the time of the revision of the Constitution, had only been accepted reluctantly by the Socialists. Rightly or wrongly, they attributed to the electoral system the prolonged resistance to the combined attacks of the Opposition. After joining forces with the Liberals during the 1910 elections, they were disappointed by the result, which maintained the Schollaert Cabinet in power with a small majority.

The next year the Prime Minister presented a bill introducing compulsory education and extending subsidies to free and official schools, which provoked the protests of the Opposition and of a certain number of Catholics. The King took this opportunity to make certain changes in the Cabinet and chose as Prime Minister M. de Broqueville, whose democratic tendencies were known to him and on whose support he could rely to bring about, at the first opportunity, the military reforms which the international situation urgently demanded.

Encouraged by this result, and believing that "the King was with them," the combined Opposition redoubled their efforts in favour of general suffrage, but the violence of their attacks defeated their purpose, and when the Sovereign dissolved Parliament, in 1912, to allow the electors to manifest their wishes, the Catholics were returned with an increased majority.

Exasperated by this result, the Socialists decided that unless a new revision of the Constitution were adopted by the Chamber, they would declare a general strike. This took place in April 1913, involving 370,000 workers and paralysing the country's principal industries. It was all the more impressive that it was conducted with perfect discipline

and without any violence. The King did not interfere, and allowed the conflict between the Unions and Parliament to end in a stalemate. A compromise was struck, a week later, by the adoption of a resolution in favour of an early revision. A few months later the Chambers adopted compulsory education, a reform which, in the Sovereign's opinion, was bound to come before general suffrage.

The prestige of the King remained unimpaired. In spite of their disappointment, the Socialists could not tax him with partiality, and the Catholics recognized that if he had thrown his influence on the side of democracy three years before, he had shown great firmness in supporting his Government during the crisis. Once more, the Crown stood above parties and remained the supreme arbiter.

6

The history of the language question in Belgium may, roughly, be divided into three periods. Previous to the 1893 revision and the advent of democracy, its character was purely artistic and literary; from 1893 to 1914 it exerted an increasing influence on politics, without, however, affecting the discipline of the three principal parties; after the War it assumed larger proportions and caused important changes in the organization of the Belgian State.

Traditionally, Flanders had always been bi-lingual. The Dukes of Burgundy patronized French and Flemish writers, and Charles V considered Flemish as his mother tongue. Under the Federalist régime, which prevailed during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the two languages were placed on a similar footing and practised by all classes of the community. This situation altered considerably when the Southern Netherlands came under Austrian rule in the

eighteenth century, owing to the prestige of French literature and to the centralizing policy pursued by Joseph II. After the French conquest, local traditions were practically ignored. Art and literature fell into decadence and the Flemish language itself broke up into a number of popular dialects. Strangely enough, the Dutch régime, established in 1815 at Vienna, did not alter the situation, King William maintaining the political system introduced by Napoleon. The difficulties which brought about the 1830 revolution arose merely from the fact that he favoured his Dutch more than his Belgian subjects and that he interfered in Church affairs. He never thought of strengthening his position by seeking favour with the Flemish populace; on the contrary, most of his Orangist supporters belonged either to the aristocracy or to the rising class of industrialists. The severance of Belgium from Holland did not affect the language question, because this question was politically non-existent at the time. The bourgeoisie talked French in Flanders as well as in the southern provinces.

Just as foreign domination had provoked an eclipse of national art and literature, independence brought about a revival of intellectual activity. A group of Flemish writers and historians began, towards the middle of the nineteenth century, to study the folklore and the popular songs of the Flemish provinces. Aware of the past glory of Flemish art and letters, they reacted against the common belief that their language was merely a popular dialect incapable of literary expression. The renaissance of Flemish modern literature coincides with the publication of the first poems and novels produced by Belgian authors writing in French. In 1886 the Government gave an official recognition of this activity by the foundation of a Flemish Academy.

Hitherto the movement had been strictly limited to a group of Flemish authors and had provoked no reaction

among the masses. As soon, however, as the electorate was enlarged, in 1893, it passed from the intellectual to the political field. From being the theme of academic discussions between bourgeois critics, it became the subject of an intense popular propaganda. The inequality between the French-speaking and the Flemish-speaking population in Flanders, fostered by the *censitaire* régime, could not resist the advent of democracy. The linguistic question assumed thus a social aspect and the claim for legitimate reforms in the administration of justice, education and local government was closely associated with the wish to abolish what was considered a class privilege. Popular leaders, such as the Abbé Daens, denounced the use of French, not only because it had placed the Flemish-speaking population at a disadvantage but because it was spoken by the landowners and industrialists and by the rich, who scorned popular traditions and followed "foreign fashions." The campaign was led by the small clergy, who could not dissociate French literature from the anti-clerical policy pursued at the time by the French Government, and who believed that in defending their "mother tongue" they were defending religion and morality. The rallying cry, "*In Vlanderen Vlaamsch*," did not only imply complete equality between French- and Flemish-speaking Belgian subjects but the wish to exclude the use of French from the Flemish provinces.

The progress of the *flamingants* coincided with the growth of large cooperatives, such as the *Boerenbond*, or league of peasants, and of the Christian democratic movement. The Catholic leaders and the higher clergy had some difficulty in preventing a split between Conservatives and democrats and, under pressure of their Left wing, the Government introduced a series of reforms which removed some of the grievances of the new electorate. The other political parties were not seriously affected; the

Socialists remained neutral and the Liberals deliberately hostile. The problem seemed to be limited to Flanders and to the Catholic party.

King Albert ascended the throne at a time when the Flemish demands assumed a more drastic character. It was urged that the army should be divided into Flemish and French-speaking units, and that the knowledge of Flemish should be made compulsory in the central Administration. It was further proposed that Flemish should be introduced in higher education and that the State university of Ghent should become a Flemish university. These demands provoked a strong reaction, not only in Brussels but also in the Walloon provinces. The language difficulty seemed to threaten the unity of the Belgian State at the very moment when the hands of the Government should have been strengthened to resist the external peril.

The King adopted, with regard to the linguistic problem, very much the same attitude which he had adopted in the political conflict. He realized that a great deal of the bitterness shown by the *flamingants* was the natural consequence of the scornful attitude adopted by their adversaries, and applied himself to calm their susceptibilities. As heir to the throne, he had already made it a rule to address his audience in the popular language whenever he spoke in the Flemish provinces. He was the first Belgian Sovereign to take the constitutional oath in both languages. Whenever he alluded to Belgian art and literature, he never failed to pay a tribute to the contribution made by Flanders to the intellectual treasure-house of the common country. In everything he said and did, he tried to show that the most enthusiastic attachment to regionalism was not incompatible with an enlightened patriotism. Having carefully studied the history of the country he was called upon to govern, he did not forget that in the past the Belgian principalities had

jealously preserved their local privileges and never submitted willingly to a policy of drastic centralization. The scope given by the Constitution to provincial and communal authorities showed that, even in 1830, when French influence was uppermost, these old regionalist traditions had not been forgotten. It was only natural that the advent of democracy should revive them. Instead of attempting to suppress these aspirations, a wise Government should apply itself to conciliate them with the practical necessity of maintaining sufficient unity to allow a close economic and intellectual collaboration between the nine provinces of the small kingdom.

7

The question of the responsibility for the War has been confused by so many side-issues that it will remain for long, perhaps for ever, the subject of learned discussions. One conviction, however, emerges from the critical study of the documents published during the last twenty years. The position of Belgium is unimpaired. She was throughout scrupulously faithful to her obligations as a neutral State, placed between the two groups of rival Powers which were drifting towards the European conflagration. She was no party to any public or secret compact, and preserved up to the day of the violation of her frontiers a scrupulously impartial attitude. The only reproach which can be made against her is that, through an exaggerated belief in the sanctity of treaties, she delayed too long before taking the defensive measures which the international situation urgently demanded. Up to the very last hour—on August 4th—the keystone of Europe remained in the position in which it had been placed eighty-four years before.

In order to obtain a comprehensive view of the events which succeeded each other during this pre-War period, it is necessary to take up the story from 1904, five years before King Albert's accession. This date marks a definite turning-point. Great Britain definitely abandons her isolationist attitude; the Kaiser, after years of hesitation, agrees with his General Staff on the necessity of attacking France through Belgian territory. From that moment the stage is set for the great drama. The adoption of the Schlieffen plan coincides with the conclusion of the Entente. The German Emperor's premeditation is clearly shown by his vain attempt to secure King Leopold's complicity, in January 1904,* and by his letter to von Bülow in July 1905, in which he points out that, in case of a conflict with England, the invasion of Belgium must follow immediately the declaration of war.†

In March of the same year, the Tangiers incident had brought Europe to the verge of war, and the military leaders of the Entente, aware of the Schlieffen plan, were naturally made anxious by the inadequacy of Belgian defences. Colonel Barnardiston, the British military attaché, had some confidential conversations with General Ducarne, the Belgian Chief of Staff, which were summarized by the latter in the report entitled: "Dispositions to be taken for furthering the intervention of a British army in case Germany attacks our neutrality." These last words show that these private talks were not more incompatible with Belgian obligation than similar interviews which had taken place between the German attaché and the Belgian Prime Minister in 1887. The document was, nevertheless, used later by German propagandists, together with the account of the enquiries made by Lieutenant-Colonel Bridges in 1912, as a

* See p. 189.

† *Die Grosse Politik*, etc. (1871-1914).

conclusive proof that Belgium had deliberately broken her international obligations and that the German violation of the treaties was therefore justified.

As a matter of fact, the reserved attitude of the Belgian Government and its refusal to come to a secret understanding fostered strong suspicions on the part of the Entente. In November 1908 Mr. Eyre Crowe, in answer to a question of Sir Edward Grey, drafted a memorandum in which he examined Great Britain's obligation under the treaties "in case Belgium acquiesced in a violation of her neutrality". The next year several dispatches reached the Foreign Office from Paris and from Brussels dwelling on the possibility that the Belgians might "put their money" on Germany, or at least limit their resistance to the defence of their forts.*

These suspicions increased after the Agadir coup of 1911, which came as a second warning of the unavoidable catastrophe. When Joffre became Chief of the French General Staff the following year, he wished to examine whether the offensive planned by Schlieffen could not be countered by a previous understanding with Belgium, or by a French counter-offensive through her territory.† This led to a new series of conversations between the British military and naval attachés in Brussels and the Belgian military authorities. The announcement made by Lieutenant-Colonel Bridges in April that, if war had broken out during the recent crisis, British forces would have landed on the Flemish coast, raised a fresh difficulty. The Belgians considered that they could not properly safeguard their neutrality if military intervention took place before the violation of their territory, and before they had formally appealed to their guarantors. This view was finally

* *British Documents*, VIII, pp. 375-380.

† Maréchal Joffre: *Mémoires*.

endorsed by Sir Edward Grey, and General Wilson informed the French General Staff, in November, that "if France were the first to violate the Belgian frontier, the Belgian army would certainly join the German forces," and that "the British Government would be called upon to protect Belgian neutrality". However disastrous the refusal to come to an understanding with the Entente Powers proved to be during the first months of the conflict, it was the only one consistent with the country's legal obligations. Events confirmed ultimately King Albert's motto: "Honesty is the best policy," for any material advantage derived from a pre-War alliance would have been more than compensated by the moral loss involved. Belgian diplomats had realized that, even in case of violation, neutrality would remain the country's most valuable asset. It was therefore essential that the breach of law, if and when it came, should be without justification or excuse, and that Belgium should observe the treaties not only in the spirit but also in the letter, by remaining scrupulously impartial until the first enemy crossed her frontier.

This attitude was understood in 1870. In the troubled atmosphere of the pre-War years, it was misinterpreted on both sides. The Emperor and his ministers, who had taken great trouble to reassure Belgian public opinion, were convinced that the Belgians would never dare to oppose the passage of their troops, and would, at the worst, save their faces by passive resistance. The staffs of the British and French legations in Brussels, especially the latter, were equally convinced that the Government's decision would be dictated, not by honour but by expediency. The French Minister and his collaborators sent to Paris a series of reports showing Belgium ready to betray her trust, sitting on the fence, ready to jump on the winning side.* M.

* French Documents.

Klobukowski's prejudice against the Catholic Government was so strong that when an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on him on August 3rd, in order to inform him of the Belgian reply to the German ultimatum, he could not help exclaiming: "Well ! you give in!" ("*Eh bien! vous cédez!*").

8

From the time of his accession, King Albert had the presentiment that if the threatening conflict broke out, it would be during his reign. He had been warned by his uncle of the imminent danger of a German aggression. The unnecessary display of military forces made by the Kaiser on the occasion of the Belgian Royal visit to Berlin in 1910, confirmed these apprehensions. The aggressive policy pursued by Germany at Agadir, and the Franco-German convention which followed the incident, in November 1911, showed that Belgian interests were threatened not only in Europe but even in Africa. Germany had obtained part of the French Congo, and a foothold on the Congo basin. It had been even suggested that France might give up, in favour of Germany, the right of preference granted by King Leopold. The meaning of the Bridges-Jungbluth conversations concerning British military intervention was only too plain.

What could be done to parry the blow? On ascending the throne Albert I had promised to protect the country's independence and integrity. How could he keep his oath? He could not dissuade the German Emperor from carrying out a plan of aggression of which he was supposed to possess no knowledge. Neither could he, without a breach of neutrality, make preliminary arrangements with the French

and British General Staffs. He was not even able to override the opposition of the Belgian anti-militarists by publishing the confidential information which he possessed. He could only apply his efforts in attenuating the political and linguistic differences dividing his subjects and in reorganizing the army. We have seen how he succeeded in restoring, to a great extent, a spirit of patriotism and unity in his kingdom. If the conflict had broken out a few years later, he would have been able to restore in the same way the country's defences. Five years did not prove enough to eradicate long-standing prejudices and to convince the people that they should no longer put their trust in a régime which had been the foundation of their independence in the past. All that can be said is that the young Sovereign did all he could possibly do, within the time at his disposal and within the powers which the Constitution granted him.

The military reform of 1909, for which Leopold II had waited so long, had a good moral effect, but left the Belgian forces very much where they stood in 1870, while those of France and Germany had increased tenfold. Pending a new reform which the country was not yet prepared to accept, the King endeavoured to improve the organization of the General Staff and the country's defensive plans. He refused the suggestion made in 1910 by his Minister of War that he should delegate the supreme command of the army in time of war to one of his generals, and chose as Chief of Staff his former tutor, Lieutenant-General Jungbluth. The same year he seized the opportunity of a political crisis to place at the head of his Cabinet M. de Broqueville, whom he asked, two years later, to take the portfolio of War in the well-founded hope of persuading him to introduce a new military bill. In close collaboration with Commandant Galet, he prepared new plans of defence according to which, in the eventuality of a German aggression, the Belgian field army

would take its stand on the Meuse, Antwerp remaining the basis of operations and the ultimate refuge.

In December 1912 the King received a warning which stirred him to further action. In answer to his enquiry, his uncle, King Carol of Rumania, who was in close touch with German official circles, expressed the emphatic opinion that, in case of hostilities, "neutrality would no longer be taken into account," and that "the miracle of 1870 would not be repeated." Two months later, in a secret session of the Chamber, the Prime Minister made use of this information to persuade its members of the urgent need of increasing the army. Unfortunately, the full effect of the new law, which would have given Belgium a force of 350,000, could only be felt after ten years. The invasion took place after eighteen months!

Shortly afterwards the Belgian military attaché in Berlin sent to Brussels an account of a conversation he had had with the German Chief of Staff. "What would Belgium do," the latter had asked, "if important forces entered her territory?" "Defend her neutrality," was the answer. "Yes, but what did Belgium exactly mean by the defence of her neutrality?" The King and his military adviser drew up a memorandum. It was decided that Belgium "should immediately declare war on the invader and that she should pursue hostilities with the utmost energy." This decision, which had, of course, to be kept secret, shows that the doubt expressed on the part of the Allies concerning the attitude of Belgium in case of "substantial" or "unsubstantial" violation of her frontiers were without foundation, and that the alternative of "passive resistance" was not even considered.*

Now that the military law had been passed, defensive plans settled and the General Staff reorganized, the young

* Lieutenant-General Gallet: *Albert, King of the Belgians, in the Great War*, p. 22.

Sovereign was at least assured that, given time, he could make an honourable defence. He placed little faith in the Kaiser's pacific declarations made during his visit to Brussels in 1910, and in the official denials opposed by the German Chancellor, and more recently by the Secretary of State and the War Minister, to the rumours of an intended violation of the 1839 treaties. In the hope of obtaining further information, he paid a visit to Potsdam in November 1913. The result was even more alarming than he had expected. He found the Kaiser in an aggressive and vain-glorious mood, declaring that a conflict with France had now become "inevitable," while von Moltke insisted on the military supremacy of Germany and on "the necessity for smaller States to join the Reich if they wished to safeguard their existence." It was, couched in more careful terms, the offer made nine years before to Leopold II. King Albert decided that he could not, without complicity, withhold this information from the French Government. He did not, according to the words used by M. Jules Cambon in relating this incident, "engage his country's policy" on the side of the Entente, but acted simply as any honest man would have acted in the same circumstances.* As far as Belgium was concerned, nothing could be altered. The Kaiser's confidences could not be published without precipitating the catastrophe. Although Germany's plans were evident enough, they had only taken hitherto the form of a veiled threat. This might merely be a feeler to sound Belgian intentions. Far from allowing more freedom of action, the knowledge which the Sovereign brought back with him from Potsdam induced him to be more scrupulously neutral than ever, in order to prevent the German Government from seizing upon the slightest sign of partiality to justify its actions.

* Baron Beyens: *La Neutralité belge et l'Invasion de la Belgique*.

9

While King Albert and his advisers were torn with anxiety during the months which preceded the War, the people continued to live in blissful ignorance of the danger which threatened them. Apart from a few war-mongers and alarmists, they believed that war, on a large scale, had become an impossibility in modern times. Popular books and articles propounded the theory that "war would kill war," that a conflict between the great Powers would prove so destructive and involve so large an expenditure that the belligerent States would collapse automatically, after a few weeks, before an issue had been reached. Besides, even supposing that a new conflict broke out, neither the French nor the Germans were more likely to infringe Belgian neutrality in the twentieth century than they had done in the nineteenth. The régime had stood the test. The Anglo-French Entente was not a definite alliance, and Great Britain still held the scales, for she was mistress of the sea. The blockade would starve any recalcitrant State, not in four years but in four months. As for the danger of one or other party demanding a free passage through Belgian territory, had not the question been definitely settled by The Hague Conventions, which determined the rights and duties of neutrals in time of war? If armaments had increased, International Law had also progressed. Negotiations would solve the next crisis as they had solved the crises of 1905 and 1911.

Contrary to the opinions entertained in Germany, in France and to a certain extent in England, the question of renouncing neutrality and siding with one or the other group of Powers was scarcely ever raised. Sympathies were divided, but they did not affect national policy. The

Walloons were generally pro-French and the Flemings anti-French, without being pro-German. Some Liberals were drawn towards France on account of her anti-clerical policy, while a number of Catholics were drawn towards Germany because of her conservative tendencies. The intellectual world was attracted by German music, but also by French painting and literature. German scientific methods were adopted in Belgian universities, but the Press was subjected to French influence. As for the Socialists, they were frankly internationalists, and pinned their faith on the alliance of international Labour against Capitalist Governments. Their leader, Vandervelde, stretched one hand to Jaurès and the other to Bebel. At a mass meeting held in Brussels, on the eve of the crisis, this sacred alliance of the proletariat had been reasserted before a wildly enthusiastic audience. The workers, who formed the majority of the army, would refuse to shoot their fellow-workers and would down their weapons to enforce peace, as they had downed tools to exact democratic reforms. Brussels had become the centre of the "Labour International" as it had become a world-centre in Law, Science and various social and humanitarian activities. It was the most convenient meeting-place for congresses, and was frequently adopted as the seat of their permanent secretariat. If superficially the capital appeared to the foreigner as a "small Paris," Flemish Antwerp, as the natural outlet of the Rhine, had become almost a German port, with a large German colony. As early as 1905 *The Times* had spoken of Belgium as being the "economic vassal" of the Reich.

The fact is that the country had again become in the twentieth century what it had been in the sixteenth—the most European State on the Continent, blending Latin and Germanic characteristics, gathering the benefit of a network of economic and intellectual relations. Under the vigorous

impulse of Leopold II's policy, she had broken the bonds of her old parochial life and taken a prominent part in modern civilization. Some of her writers prophesied that, after being for centuries the object of foreign ambition and the theatre of war, she would soon become the pioneer of peace, the meeting-place of the most independent and enlightened men of all lands, the common storehouse where Europe would pool her resources, the natural link between political and religious creeds.

CHAPTER XII

“CORNERED INTO HEROISM”

I

EVERY incident which occurred between the declaration of war by Austria against Serbia, on July 28th, 1914, and the invasion of Belgian territory on August 4th, shows that the German Government had decided to subordinate the respect of treaties to military expediency. The General Staff had laid their plans ten years before these had been approved by the Emperor, and the heads of the civil administration had neither the power nor the courage to oppose them. The part played previously by neutral Belgium in preventing or limiting international conflicts could only be played successfully if her position as the keystone of Europe were recognized by her neighbours, or at least if the Powers concerned were convinced that the violation of the 1839 treaties would have disastrous effects. The military advantages of a surprise attack through Belgian territory were obvious. It enabled the aggressor to turn the line of powerful fortifications erected along the Franco-German frontier, and opened the way to the industrial districts of Northern France. Neither Belgian resistance nor the intervention of Great Britain, could prevent the German leaders from applying a plan which would allow them to disable France within a few weeks, in order to meet the impact of the Russian forces. It was, as they repeated at the time, a “question of life or death,” the only means of avoiding being caught between two enemies and being subjected to

simultaneous attacks in the East and in the West. Besides, all the documents published since the War show that they were convinced that the Belgians would never dare to fight to the end, and that British intervention, when it came—if it came at all—could never save France from a crushing defeat. No hesitation was possible between a positive advantage and problematic obstacles. These calculations were sound enough on the part of soldiers and statesmen who considered that international obligations could be broken with impunity. They miscarried because the German Government did not take into account the fact that public opinion in Belgium and Great Britain did not share the same views, and would find no other alternative than to defend national honour. It appears evident to-day that, in doing so, both countries ultimately defended their own interests. In spite of all promises, if Belgium had given way, she would have become a vassal State of the Reich, while Great Britain would scarcely have been able to resist alone the imperialistic projects of a victorious Germany. But popular opinion in democratic countries is seldom able to take a long view of historical events and its decisions are more easily influenced by idealistic motives than by selfish interests.

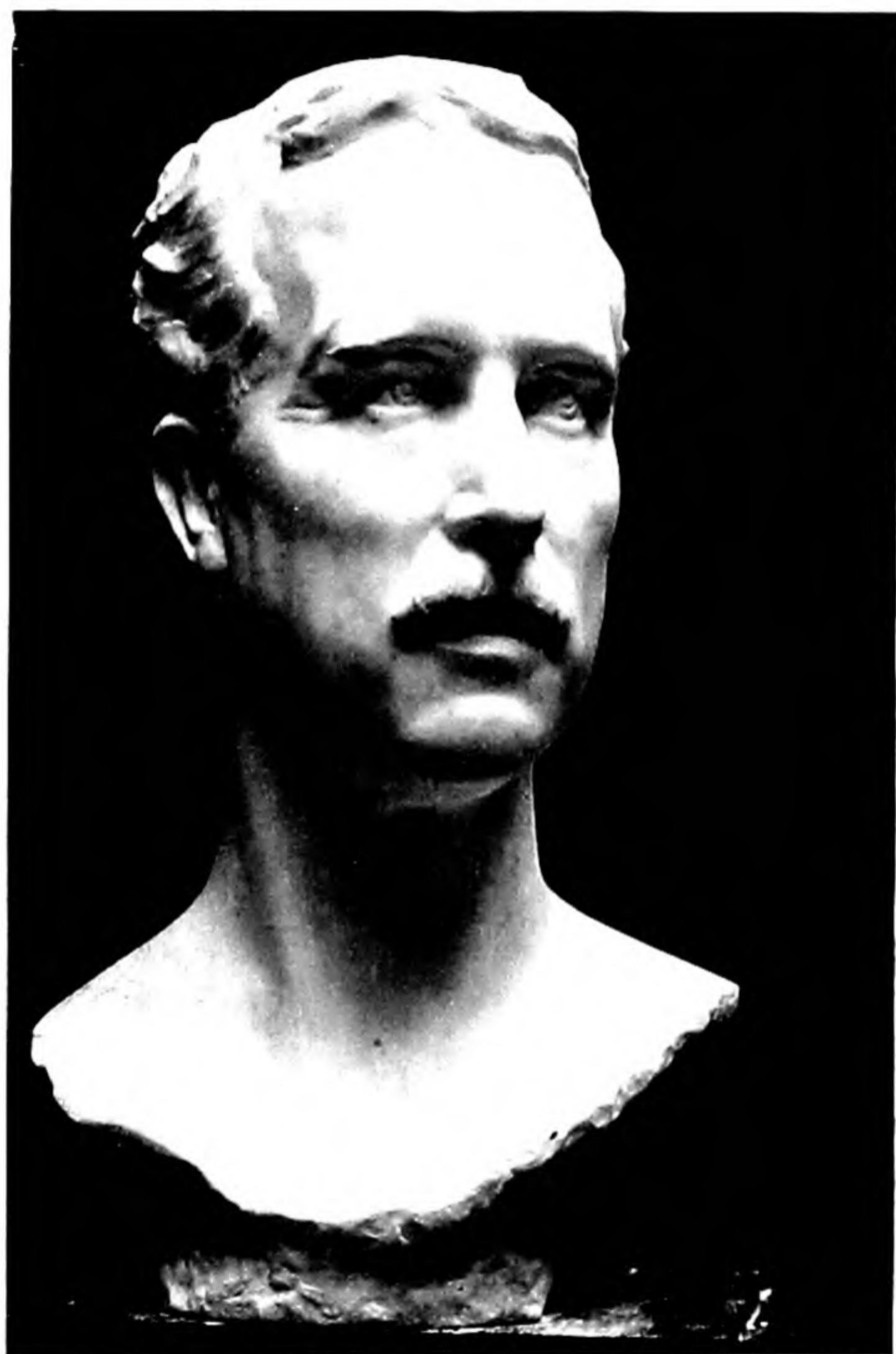
German diplomats were desperately anxious to keep Great Britain out of the struggle. They knew that she would do her utmost to avoid a conflict and that the vague character of her undertakings towards the French might give her an opportunity of adopting a neutral attitude on land, during the first critical weeks of hostilities. They made the cardinal mistake of challenging the very treaties on which European order had been built for the last eighty years and of narrowing the problem in such a way as to preclude any hesitation between “right and might.” The partisans of neutrality in England might question the opportunity of helping France, and more particularly Russia, and the binding character of

engagements which had not assumed, in the eyes of the public, a concrete and definite form. They could no longer do so once the question of Belgian independence and integrity was raised. The keystone of Europe became Germany's stumbling-block.

2

The first mention of Belgium occurred in a conversation between Sir Edward Goschen and von Bethmann-Hollweg, on the morrow of Austria's declaration of war against Serbia. The German Chancellor assured the British Ambassador that the integrity of the country would be respected, but hinted at the same time that Germany's attitude depended on circumstances. Scenting danger, Sir Edward Grey, following the example of Gladstone in 1870, sent immediately a note to the French and to the German Governments asking them to declare their intentions with regard to Belgian neutrality. The next day the French gave an explicit undertaking to respect Belgian frontiers as long as they were respected by their enemies. So far the correspondence tallies perfectly with that which had taken place forty-four years before, but while Bismarck's answer had been as explicit as that of Napoleon's minister, von Bethmann-Hollweg's remained evasive.

King Albert, who had been informed of this exchange of notes, decided to appeal personally to the Kaiser. He reminded him, in a private letter dated August 1st, of the assurances given repeatedly by himself and his ministers concerning the respect of Belgian neutrality, and asked him to renew them, if not officially at least privately. "We understand perfectly," he wrote, "the political objection which militates against the publication of such a declaration,



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[illegible]

but we do not imagine for one moment that the feelings and the intentions of the powerful Empire over which Your Majesty holds sway have undergone any change with regard to ourselves.”

The same day, in an interview with Lichnowsky, Grey insisted on the deplorable effect which a breach of Belgian neutrality might have on Anglo-German relations. It would be “very difficult,” he insisted, for the British Government to keep out of the conflict if Germany ignored her obligations.

Meanwhile, in Brussels, officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did their utmost to obtain further information from the German Legation. To these enquiries the Minister answered that, although he had no official instructions on the subject, he was “personally convinced” that the Belgians had no cause for anxiety. Five days previously, Graf von Below had received a mysterious envelope which he was only authorized to open after further instructions. This envelope contained the famous ultimatum which had been drafted by the German Chief of Staff, von Moltke, as early as July 26th, two days before the declaration of war against Serbia and three days before Russia’s partial mobilization.* The first draft based the German demand for a free passage through Belgium on the knowledge of an imminent invasion of the country by British as well as by French troops, and added to a promise of indemnity territorial compensations at the expense of France. It had been subsequently altered in order no doubt to spare British susceptibilities and attenuate the sordid character of the proposal. Final instructions reached the German Legation on August 2nd, and the note was duly delivered to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs at seven o’clock in the evening. The Belgians were given twelve hours to make up their minds. If they allowed the Kaiser’s

* L. Leclère: *La Belgique et l’Allemagne du 25 Juillet au 4 Août, 1914.*

armies to cross their territory without hampering their progress, the German Government undertook to evacuate Belgium after the war and to recognize her independence. If they opposed the German advance by any hostile act or by the destruction of roads and railways, they would be considered and treated as enemies, and would receive no guarantee with regard to the future.

3

The Belgian reaction to this challenge was immediate and unanimous. The pretext taken by the German Government—the threat of a French invasion—was without foundation, and the duty of a neutral State to oppose the passage of foreign troops had been strictly defined by the international Conventions recently concluded at The Hague. King Albert, who had for years foretold the danger which threatened his country, had already determined his line of action. The officials of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs had studied beforehand the various eventualities before which Belgium might be placed if one or more belligerents wished to violate her frontiers, and were equally convinced that International Law and common morality did not leave any other alternative than a firm and categorical refusal. While the Sovereign discussed the situation with his ministers at the Palace, Baron de Gaiffier prepared, at the Ministry, an answer to the ultimatum which coincides almost word for word with the text finally adopted by the Cabinet.* No Belgian statesman or diplomat could entertain the faintest doubt as to the issue. No voice was raised to suggest a compromise. Complete agreement was reached from the first.

* E. Cammaerts: *Albert of Belgium*, pp. 23-25.

The decision which was going to plunge a weak and ill-prepared country into a deadly struggle with the first Military Power in Europe was not taken rashly or dictated by a sudden outburst of anger. For the King and his advisers the blow was not unexpected. Those who had entertained illusions as to the guarantees provided by neutrality during the last years realized the vanity of Germany's promises. Even if integrity could be maintained, in case of compliance, independence could never be preserved. Neutrality remained Belgium's strongest asset. Its defence was the surest means of securing the protection of the Powers who had not infringed it, and the moral support of the world. The prolonged resistance of the Belgian army was the only safeguard left against the bitter humiliation of seeing the country turned once more into the battle-field of Europe. The statesmen gathered at the Palace did not entertain the fond hope that Belgium might escape the horrors of war. True, they did not expect that allied help would be delayed for so long and only become effective after three months' fighting; neither did they imagine that the German armies would indulge in acts of terrorism without any justification; but they knew that the forthcoming struggle would, in any event, involve enormous losses in life and property, and that the fate of Belgium hung in the balance. They took their resolution with their eyes open to its consequences, simply because it was the only one they could possibly take in the circumstances.

The Belgian answer to the German ultimatum does not contain a word which might suggest anger or self-pity. It merely recalls the treaties on which the neutral status of the country was based, and to which she had remained scrupulously faithful: “Conscious of the part which Belgium has played for more than eighty years in the civilization of the world, the Belgian Government refuse to believe that the

independence of Belgium can only be preserved at the price of the violation of her neutrality. If this hope is disappointed, the Belgian Government is firmly resolved to repel, by all means in its power, every attack upon its rights."

These words reflected King Albert's conception of Belgian responsibilities. In spite of the grievous anxieties which the problem of defence caused him at the time, he never lost sight of the historical aspect of the crisis. When, on August 4th, he received the Kaiser's long-delayed answer to his letter, he replied almost in the same terms. He had not for one moment supposed, he wrote, that the Emperor would "face him with the cruel alternative of choosing, in the face of Europe, between war and the loss of honour, between the respect of treaties and the denial of international obligations." Again, the same day, speaking in Parliament before leaving for his Headquarters, he dwelt on "the necessity of the independent existence of Belgium for the maintenance of the Balance of Power in Europe." His mind was divided between his duties towards his country and towards Europe. He was bound by his constitutional oath to protect Belgian independence and integrity, but he was also bound by the treaties which were the condition of Belgian independence to observe and defend the country's neutrality, and to prevent any Power from launching an attack through Belgian territory. No conflict existed between these two duties; neutrality was the condition of independence. It was impossible to preserve one without defending the other.

This attitude, which was shared instinctively by the whole nation, was scarcely understood abroad at the time. German propaganda spread the rumour of a preconceived plan between Belgium and the Allies, and pretence to discover a proof of this plot in the military conversations which had taken place in 1905 and 1912 between British and Belgian

officers. The most enthusiastic admirers of King Albert in Great Britain and France looked up to him as the champion of their cause against the Central Powers. He was for them a “modern Leonidas” and Liège appeared a new Thermopylæ. It never occurred to them that if Belgium had sided deliberately with the Allies she would have been as much in the wrong as if she had allowed the German armies to cross her territory in order to fall upon the French. The King never wished to indulge in heroics; the idea of placing his country in a false position and breaking her pledges was still more remote from his thoughts. As he expressed it on several occasions, he did nothing but his duty; he was “cornered into heroism” (*“nous avons été acculés à l’héroïsme”*).

4

After the Belgian answer had been duly delivered, on August 3rd, King Albert addressed a supreme appeal to King George requesting the “diplomatic support” of England. Although the situation was extremely critical, it was still possible that the Germans might call off their bluff when faced by the firm attitude of Belgium and the certainty of British intervention. On the other hand, it was essential not to give the Reich any pretext for precipitating its action by appealing for military intervention before any actual violation of the frontier had taken place. The Belgian note and the King’s private letter to William II had not yet been answered. British diplomatic support was given even before the text of the ultimatum was known in London. In a public speech in Parliament, Sir Edward Grey, after reminding the House of Gladstone’s attitude in 1870, insisted on the capital importance which the British Government

attached to the respect of Belgian neutrality. The next day, being fully informed of the contents of the German and Belgian notes, he wired to the British Ambassador in Berlin instructing him to obtain the immediate assurance that the threat would not be carried into effect. By that time this threat had become, for Germany, a means of keeping Great Britain out of the war. The ultimatum had spoken of the preservation of integrity and independence, if Belgium complied with the German demand. Lichnowsky went a step further and promised Grey that her integrity would be respected even if Belgium opposed the passage of German troops. A few hours later, von Bethmann-Hollweg, addressing the Reichstag, recognized the "wrong" committed towards Belgium and undertook that both her integrity and independence would be respected. The British attitude remained unshaken. Several German units had already crossed the frontier and Belgium had appealed to her guarantors for military support. A British ultimatum made it plain to Berlin that if the invasion were proceeded with war would inevitably follow. A last interview took place between the British Ambassador and the Chancellor in which the latter spoke of the 1839 treaties as a "scrap of paper." The military machine had been set in motion. It was beyond the power of any civilian in Germany to call a halt.*

Thus, step by step, the consequences of Germany's action brought the inevitable conflict nearer and nearer. The publication of the Benedetti treaty had caused considerable indignation in London in 1870, but this indignation could not be compared with the feeling stirred by the publication of the German ultimatum and of the Belgian answer. From one day to another the divisions which existed within the Cabinet disappeared, and the dangerous quarrel provoked by the Irish question was shelved. Among all classes and

* von Bethmann-Hollweg: *Reflections on the World War*.

parties it was felt that this new development was even more important than the conflict between the Central Powers and the Franco-Russian Alliance. It struck at the root of international life; it shook the very foundation of European order. Just as the realization of Germany's military plans had become for her “a question of life and death,” the maintenance of an international engagement affecting the keystone of Europe had assumed, according to the words of Sir Edward Goschen, the same vital importance.

The fact that public opinion underwent a considerable change towards the end of the War and that national ambitions reasserted themselves at Versailles does not alter the moral aspect which the conflict assumed at first, and the influence which this “question of principle” exerted on the struggle. In spite of all the justified and unjustified criticisms to which the Allies' policy has been subjected, it remains historically true that the violation of Belgian neutrality brought the British Empire into the War, and transformed a struggle for hegemony in Europe into a social crusade for the maintenance and consolidation of international order and justice.

5

Very much against his will, King Albert became the popular figure of this phase of the War. A legendary hero must fulfil two essential conditions : he must fight against odds and he must win in the end. If his enemy is able to bring him to the verge of ruin, his final success will appear more glorious still. All these circumstances were realized in the King's career during the World War. At the head of a small army, he had to contend alone with vastly superior and perfectly equipped forces. He was compelled to retire

first on Antwerp, later beyond the Yser, in the last corner of his ravaged kingdom. There he had to wait four years, exiled with his Queen in a little fishing village, until the day when the Allies were at last able to undertake a concerted offensive all along the Western front and to push back the invader towards the Rhine. He did not, however, possess any of the magic weapons and supernatural help usually placed at the disposal of those with whom he was fondly compared, unless we are to attach supernatural virtues to an unshakable resolution and an inexhaustible patience.

The obstacles appeared indeed insuperable. The military reform adopted the previous year had scarcely had any effect, and general mobilization, decreed on July 31st, had only brought together a field army of 117,000 men. Apart from the 18,000 untrained volunteers who had rushed to arms during the first days of the conflict, there was no reserve. Heavy guns ordered in Germany had not been delivered, the number of machine guns was insignificant, and the splendid morale of the troops could scarcely make up for their lack of training and discipline.

King Albert had decided to retain the supreme command given him by the Constitution. He wished to assume the responsibility for military operations towards Belgium's guarantors and knew that his presence would encourage the troops. He hoped, however, to find in his Staff some experienced officers on whose advice he might implicitly rely, and who would be prepared to carry out the new plans of defence which had been prepared a few years before. In this he was to be disappointed. Towards the end of July, on the eve of the impending conflict, he learnt that, contrary to previous arrangements, the army was to be concentrated in Brabant. The only measure he could still take, in order to strengthen the defence of the Meuse without disorganizing mobilization, was to send the third Division to

Liège and the fourth to Namur.* As the operations developed, he felt obliged to rely more and more on himself.

The King's relations with the French Command were fraught with still graver difficulties. It has already been explained why any preconcerted plan with the Allies was inconsistent with Belgian neutrality. The lack of such a plan prompted the French to concentrate their armies along their eastern frontier, and the British to send their expeditionary corps to France instead of Flanders. This arrangement had disastrous consequences for the Belgians, who were isolated from the allied forces and obliged to stand the first shock of the German army unsupported. It also prompted the French Staff to consider the invasion of Belgium, not as a vast turning movement aimed at France but as a minor operation which slight reinforcements would allow the Belgians to check. The King was therefore urged to take the offensive, and this dangerous advice found strong supporters among his own Staff.

This bold optimism had been greatly encouraged by the successful resistance of the Liège forts to the first German assault, on August 5th. Expecting that the place would only be held by a small garrison, the Germans tried to force a way through without waiting for their heavy artillery. Thanks to the King's foresight, General Leman was able to inflict heavy losses on the enemy's vanguard and to keep up the resistance until August 16th, when he was found unconscious under the ruins of Loncin and taken captive to Germany.

In spite of the great value of the defence of Liège in enhancing Belgian prestige and delaying the enemy, the Commander-in-Chief had no illusions as to the possibility of reinforcing the garrison. The third Division had been compelled to retire as soon as the Germans had crossed the Meuse, in order to avoid envelopment, and information

* General Gallet: *King Albert*, p. 43.

received at Headquarters showed that von Emmich's army was only the vanguard of several army corps attacking on a wide front north of the Meuse. The Belgians had taken their position in front of Louvain and remained on the defensive, their right wing resting on Namur and their left on Antwerp, which remained the basis of operations. For a week they awaited anxiously the arrival of reinforcements. They received instead a series of messages requesting them to march against an enemy whose strength increased every day, and who began to threaten their communications with Antwerp. A bold attack carried out on the 12th near Haelen had retarded this movement, but the position remained critical.

Three days previously the King had been subjected to another diplomatic manœuvre on the part of the German Government. A message reached him through Holland asking him to cease hostilities now that his army had shown its gallantry, through its "heroic resistance against vastly superior numbers," and to "spare Belgium further horrors of war." Once more the integrity and independence of the country was promised as a reward of his betrayal. Read in the light of the news which had reached Headquarters from the Liège district, showing the policy of terrorism pursued by the German troops towards unarmed civilians, the message flavoured of blackmail. Now that the die had been cast, and that the Allies had answered his appeal, King Albert had decided to go on fighting to the end. He was equally determined to preserve his army from envelopment. He remained in Brabant until the 18th, but when he heard that forces half a million strong were rapidly concentrating on his positions and that neither the British nor the French could promise any support before another week elapsed, he did not hesitate to give the order to retire. He had lost 20,000 men in Liège and had suffered a severe check, the same day, east of Louvain. Brussels could no longer be saved.

6

One of the main difficulties against which the King had to contend was to induce his supporters and followers to realize the tragic events which they were witnessing. Most of the illusions of the French were based on wrong and incomplete information. The illusions of a large number of Belgians rested on the vaguest and most groundless rumours. Unwilling to face the terrible facts with which they were confronted, they were only too ready to believe that the German effort was already exhausted, and that the Allies' delay was due to some cunning strategical plan which would shortly check the enemy's advance and deliver the country. The Government had moved from Brussels to Antwerp, and on arriving there was again surrounded with would-be advisers who considered that the time had come to strike a deadly blow by attacking the enemy in the rear. This advice was made more pressing by the news which reached Antwerp of the burning of Andenne, on the 20th, the sack of Taminés, on the 22nd, the massacres at Dinant, on the 23rd, and the destruction of Louvain and its famous library, on the 25th. For one moment it was feared that Brussels itself would not be spared, that the whole country would be converted into a heap of smoking ruins. The threat contained in the second ultimatum of August 9th was proving deadly effective, and the indignation provoked by these excesses made it more and more difficult for the Sovereign to avoid some precipitate action which might have wrecked the country's last hope. The arrival of thousands of refugees added to the confusion.

Fortunately for Belgium, King Albert did not allow his feelings to weigh upon his decisions. He knew by now what he could ask of his troops, and was aware of the enormous

reserves at the disposal of the enemy. The German leaders had not pursued their attacks against the Belgians after the retreat to Antwerp, but they had left an adequate screen of troops behind them while they continued their relentless progress against the Allies. It would have been folly to attempt any operation which might have cut off the field army from its base. It was nevertheless possible, through a series of well-timed operations, to harass the enemy's communications and to compel them to keep in Belgium a number of units which might otherwise have collaborated in the great offensive in northern France.

The Commander-in-Chief soon showed his critics that he had no intention of shutting himself up in Antwerp. He organized two sorties—at the end of August and in the beginning of September. The first was destined to relieve the pressure exerted on the Allies between Mons and Namur, the second to provoke a diversion on the eve of the battle of the Marne. The latter was particularly successful and contributed in no small measure to the defeat of the German armies. In order to check an advance which jeopardized for a time its communication between Brussels and Liège, the enemy was compelled to retain in Belgium forces which might have played a decisive part in France.

Now that a wave of pessimism had succeeded the wild optimism of the first weeks of the struggle, King Albert began to hope that the worst of the German attack was over. Talking to the French Ambassador, on September 3rd, six days before the battle of the Marne, he pointed out that the Germans could only succeed if they met with no unforeseen obstacle. "The campaign has now been going on for a month," he added, "and in no quarter have the Franco-British armies been broken or pierced. It is the rock upon which the impetus of the German army will exhaust itself—an impetus decreasing every day, because that army is

moving farther and farther from its base, because it is obliged to guard longer and longer communications, and because it is threatened in the rear by an enemy whose progress can only be delayed by mobilizing important units.”

This was sound reasoning as far as it went, and future events proved it to be so. No doubt the German offensive, checked in the South, would recoil upon Antwerp, but northern Flanders remained free and it was to be expected that the Allies, who were now making rapid progress, would be able to join forces with the Belgians and reinforce Antwerp by land or sea. Help so anxiously awaited in August was at last forthcoming. What the King did not foresee was that neither Joffre nor French realized at the time the importance of defending the Belgian coast, and were reluctant to divert any troops from the main theatre of operations.

7

The story of the fall of Antwerp has been told by British, French, German and Belgian military experts. The impression one gathers from these various accounts is that the loss of that important position was by no means unavoidable. Granted that the powerful batteries brought back from France could destroy the forts of Antwerp as they had destroyed those of Liège and Namur, the line provided by the Scheldt and the Lys afforded a natural protection to the coast, and its defence against von Beseler's army was as essential to the British as to the Belgians. Unfortunately, events moved too quickly and councils were once more divided. In spite of Belgium's warnings and of Mr. Churchill's efforts, the reinforcements which reached Flanders in time were inadequate—2,000 British Marines and 8,000 *Fusiliers marins*.

The attack started on September 25th. A week later, the Belgians were compelled to abandon their first line of defence. On October 6th the bulk of the field army crossed the Scheldt to take up its position on the left bank of the river, where the King intended to pursue the fight as long as his communications with France remained intact. The situation was now entirely reversed. Instead of being pressed to take the offensive, the Commander-in-Chief was urged by his French and the majority of his Belgian advisers to retire immediately. He was finally compelled to do so on October 8th, after making suitable provisions for the evacuation of the British Naval Division and the Belgian Second Division, which collaborated to the last in the defence. His army was completely exhausted and demoralized by the state of panic prevailing among the crowd of refugees who thronged the roads and hampered its movements. The retreat was covered by the French marines and certain units of the 7th British Division, which had reached Zeebrugge too late to prevent the fall of Antwerp.

At a meeting attended by Generals Pau and Rawlinson, which took place at Ostend on October 10th, it was proposed that the Belgian army should be transferred to France and given some time to recuperate and reorganize behind the lines held by the Allies. The King had no other alternative but to agree with this decision. His forces were reduced to 70,000 men, without sufficient equipment and ammunition, apparently too discouraged to collaborate actively for some time in the operations. Almost his only comfort, during the last two months, had been to see the loyalty of his soldiers grow with their endurance and discipline. He had been with them during the recent sorties, exposing himself to the enemy's fire. He had done so at some risk, but with a very definite purpose. It was part of his conception of the High Command that the Chief

should share the dangers of those from whom he exacted obedience. As he wrote later to General Leman, “Such an example is never lost; it establishes a tradition of sacrifice, increases the strength of patriotic feeling and remains the highest manifestation of the Commander’s duty.” He had been legitimately proud of the Army, which had given a good account of itself at Liège and which had recently struck a bold and well-timed blow at the enemy. This pride was mutual. New ties had been formed between these young veterans and their young leader.

At the very moment when he had every reason to hope that his patient efforts would at last bear fruit, King Albert saw the staunch troops which he had trained on the battle-field scattered along the muddy roads of Flanders, mixed with thousands of citizens and peasants under lowering October skies. The fall of the last Belgian stronghold had been the signal of an exodus without parallel in modern history. People exposed themselves to untold dangers and sufferings rather than run the risk of plunder and massacre. A million and a half men, women and children, the fifth of the kingdom’s total population, had sought refuge along the sea, and were rapidly drifting towards Holland, France and England.

8

Was it the end? It appeared already evident that the coast of Flanders would fall into the hands of the enemy. If the fight could not be pursued on Belgian territory, the Belgian Command would lose a great deal of its prestige and of its independence. Since the beginning of operations, there had been friction between French and Belgian Headquarters. The King felt that if his army retired to France it

would be submitted to foreign control and that his personal authority might be called into question. This was confirmed, a few days later, by a message suggesting that since the Belgian army "had been greatly reduced and was about to co-operate with the Franco-British army," the Sovereign might "delegate the command to one of his generals," who would receive his orders from the Generalissimo. How could the King discharge his duties in these circumstances? How would his men accept this decision? The breach of the bond which united them with their Chief might have disastrous consequences . . .

The situation was rendered still more critical by the policy pursued by the Allies. The victory of the Marne had strengthened the hands of the partisans of the offensive, who underestimated the strength of the enemy and believed that an attack in Flanders would soon re-establish the situation. Scarcely had the idea of allowing the Belgians to reorganize their forces been suggested than a request for collaborating in the projected advance was put forward. Would the remnant of the field-army be wasted in this dangerous movement against the advice of its Chief? Would the Allies, launching their attack on Lille, leave their left flank unguarded and allow the Germans to reach the Channel ports along the sea?

During the fateful days between October 10th and 13th, when his fortune had reached its lowest ebb, King Albert had been struck by the great improvement which had taken place in his soldiers' morale. Three days' rest in the district of Nieuport had to a great extent restored their courage. They shared to the full his reluctance in leaving this last stretch of independent territory without striking a last blow for the defence of the country.

It was while inspecting their encampments along the sea that a bold plan suggested itself to the King. He had

defended successively all the strategic positions which military writers had considered as possible bulwarks against an invasion from the East—the Meuse, the Dyle, the Scheldt. A last line remained between Ypres and Nieuport, formed by the Yser and the Ypres Canal, barring the road to the Channel ports. By guarding this line the Belgian army might check a German advance along the sea and save a small part of Belgian territory. It would not suffer the humiliation of seeking shelter abroad and would safeguard its freedom of action.

From his early youth the King had been a keen sportsman. He had been one of the first Belgians to ride a motor-cycle and to drive a car, and was particularly fond of mountaineering. As a sportsman, he did not wish to take risks, but was always ready to take them in case of emergency. He was full of kindness and his modesty verged on timidity, but behind this benevolent appearance stood an indomitable resolution. By a sure instinct he felt that he had a last card to play, and he played it boldly, almost recklessly.

On October 13th he issued his historical proclamation telling his soldiers that they would “henceforth find themselves alongside the gallant French and British armies,” and that they had a reputation to maintain. “Face up to the front in the positions in which I shall place you,” he ordered, “and let him be regarded as a traitor to his country who talks of retreat unless the order for it be given.” These positions extended from the sea to Dixmude and further south on a front of twenty-five miles, the new headquarters being established at Furnes. The line was strengthened and it was made clear to every commander that it must be held “at all cost.” Even the officers belonging to the General Staff were to take their place in the fighting line. The King was giving his all; he expected everyone to do the same.

There is a dramatic quality in the story of the 1914

campaign of the Belgian army. After the surprising prelude of Liège, which appeared at the time almost unreal, the menace never ceases to grow. Apart from the short respite in Antwerp, the Belgian forces are compelled to retire in order to escape annihilation. The fall of the town appears as the culminating catastrophe of the tragedy. It is only at the last moment, when the soldiers are driven literally into their last ditch, that the reaction takes place and that, for the first time, the losing side registers a success. In the light of future events this success became a glorious victory. The last strip of Belgian territory became an impregnable position from which the enemy were never able to dislodge the national army, and from which it emerged, four years later, to take an important share in the last offensive. It might be said of the Yser what was said of the Marne. It was when everything seemed lost that everything was won.

The battle of the Yser is overshadowed by the gigantic struggle which was taking place almost at the same time on the British front in the Ypres salient. From the Belgian point of view, however, it retains the same epic qualities. The disproportion between the two forces engaged is striking. On one side, 53,000 men, supported only by a few thousand French Marines, ill equipped and lacking heavy artillery; on the other, 65,000 soldiers, cheered by a recent victory, led by experienced officers, and possessing a vast superiority in guns and equipment. From October 18th to the 31st a desperate fight was waged in the marshy meadows on both banks of the meandering stream. It was not before the 17th that Foch realized the magnitude of the German operations and the urgency of sending reinforcements. But the idea of proceeding with the projected offensive had by no means been given up, and when General Grossetti arrived at last on the 21st with his division, he established himself at Nieuport instead of reinforcing the Belgian centre, which

was sorely pressed. The French did not collaborate in the main operations before the 25th. By that time the Belgians, who had been fighting ceaselessly for seven days without relief, were too exhausted to offer the same resistance to the enemy's repeated assaults. They had to abandon the banks of the Yser and to shelter behind the embankment of the Nieuport-Dixmude railway.

After convincing himself that he could not rely on any further reinforcements from his allies, the King decided at last to order the flooding of the banks of the Yser. The main locks were opened during the night of the 29th, and as soon as the effect of the inundation made itself felt, it became evident that the Germans could not pursue their offensive. Their bitter disappointment is reflected in their account of the battle: “It was from the advance of the right wing that a decision was expected.” Since Liège, the Belgians had been a thorn in their side; they now succeeded in barring the way along the sea and in baulking all hope of turning the Allies' left flank. “In deciding to halt his army at the natural obstacle of the Yser,” writes General Azan, “King Albert created the extreme sector of the continuous front which soon extended from Switzerland to the sea . . . He closed the gateway of the north to the German invasion, and with troops which had reached the very end of their endurance, kept it closed until assistance arrived.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE BELGIAN CAUSE

I

FROM November 1914 to September 1918 the Belgian front remained approximately the same. First the French, later the British occupied for a time the sector of Nieuport, and the Belgian lines were gradually extended from Dixmude to Ypres.

The King, who was more than ever convinced that the power of the German armies could only be broken by a long resistance, remained on his positions and declined to collaborate in offensives which seemed to him ill-timed and wasteful. As he wrote in May 1917, "his duty was to prevent any useless losses among his men." After the battle of the Yser he had completely reorganized his army and had strengthened its material and artillery. Apart from the 18,000 volunteers who had enlisted at the beginning of hostilities, 25,000 men had joined the army by escaping from the occupied provinces. All the young Belgians living abroad were called to the colours. The numbers increased from 130,000 in 1916 to 170,000 in 1918, but there were no reserves available and the "watch on the Yser," as it was called, entailed considerable losses—no less than 40,000 men from December 1914 to August 1918. Apart from the wear and tear of trench warfare, there were important actions waged in 1915, and more particularly at the time of the German onslaught of April 1918. The protection afforded by the inundated area did not extend south of Dixmude and

the Belgians took their share in resisting attacks launched against the Allies in that district.

The position of the Belgian infantryman was particularly trying, not only owing to the marshy conditions prevailing on his front and to the difficulty of repairing the defence works after each bombardment, but especially owing to the fact that, being cut off from his country, he was deprived of news and lived in constant anxiety with regard to the fate of his family. The King did his utmost to attenuate these moral sufferings by visiting the trenches regularly and providing his men with the comforts which they could not receive from home. Queen Elisabeth collaborated actively in this work, and encouraged personally the efforts of the doctors and nurses in the military hospitals. Apart from one or two visits abroad, the Sovereigns never left West Flanders. They resided, most of the time, in a simple villa which still stands, facing the sea, in the small village of La Panne, at the very spot where, as we have seen, Leopold I entered his new kingdom, eighty-four years before. The bonds of mutual confidence between the Army and the Royal family were still further strengthened by the voluntary enlistment of Prince Leopold, at the early age of thirteen, in the ranks of the 12th Regiment of the Line. Belgian Princes had hitherto received a military training and served as subalterns, but they had never "claimed the honour" of serving in the ranks.

Every action of the Sovereigns was aimed at obliterating the barrier of class and position. The necessity of discipline was obvious, but in all other respects the King considered that equality of sacrifice implied equality of right. Owing to the fundamental simplicity of his own character, he sympathized with the simplicity and bluntness of the men he commanded. He never forgot their devotion and the way they answered his call. Years later he said, referring to his soldiers' devotion: "In the name of a so-called Liberty we asked of

free men, in the twentieth century, much more than was ever extorted from the serfs in the Dark Ages—and they gave it.”

The King's appreciation of his soldiers strengthened the democratic tendencies which were already manifest before his accession to the throne. It certainly prompted him to support general suffrage after the end of the War. However premature the reform might appear from a purely national point of view, it seemed to him impossible to refuse to young men who had risked their lives for the defence of the country the political rights belonging to older men whose very existence as Belgian independent citizens they had saved. A Coalition Government had been formed on the eve of the invasion. After the fall of Antwerp, its members had received the hospitality of France at Sainte-Adresse, near Havre. The Sovereign's relations with his Socialist ministers were as cordial as with the Catholics and the Liberals. Common danger had obliterated party differences.

2

If the Belgian front ceased to play a prominent part in the brutal contest of warfare, the “Belgian Cause” remained for long the subject of fierce polemics and the main asset of allied propaganda.

If the Germans had underestimated the determination of the Belgians to resist aggression, they had also neglected to take into account the reaction which the invasion of a peaceful country whose integrity they had themselves guaranteed would provoke abroad. This reaction not only roused England and the Empire, it affected neutral countries which might at any moment enter the struggle, such as Italy, Rumania and the United States. It stirred

hostile feelings in countries like Holland and Scandinavia on which Germany depended for her food supply. The violation of Belgian neutrality, on the pretext of "military necessity," became a test case. It was felt almost everywhere that the victory of the Central Empires would jeopardize the independence of all European States which did not submit to German hegemony. The conflict between partisans and adversaries of the Reich was not an academic discussion; it influenced the resolution of the democracies engaged in the fight and the sympathies of the whole world.

Writing of King Albert at the time, Paul Bourget remarked that "but for him the War would only have been a world catastrophe without any definite meaning". In spite of its exaggeration this statement contains a good deal of truth. To an impartial observer who followed the course of events from 1870 to 1914, the outbreak of hostilities between the two groups of rival Powers might well have appeared as a natural phenomenon for which neither side was entirely responsible. The question whether Germany or Russia "began it" might have led to endless discussions, and opinion in neutral countries would have been divided according to personal, racial or linguistic sympathies. Small States particularly might have been inclined to blame both sides and to consider that their independence would suffer, whatsoever the issue of the struggle might be.

In spite of the efforts made by German propagandists to blur the issue by exploiting the pre-War conversations between Belgian and British officers, impartial opinion could never believe in "the complicity of Belgium." The public confession made on August 4th by the Chancellor was conclusive evidence of Belgium's good faith; so were the series of reverses suffered by the Belgian army, which waited vainly for three months before receiving adequate support. The question was narrowed, therefore, to Germany's respon-

sibility for betraying a solemn treaty and taking an unfair advantage of the trust placed in her signature. Both groups of Powers pursued rival policies and accumulated armaments, but Germany and Austria alone had violated their pledge. Sympathy for Belgium—and consequently for the Powers who “championed” her cause—was increased by the courage displayed by her troops in face of the overwhelming superiority of the enemy, and by the policy of terrorism against the unarmed population pursued by the German leaders. Liège and Louvain were names to conjure with, the first evoking the noble figure of old General Leman, the other the destruction of a unique library and of one of Europe’s most ancient seats of learning. The lawless character of the assault was increased by its unexpected cruelty. Popular imagination is easily moved by simple facts. As an American put it at the time, “the Belgian story was as good as a play.” This is perhaps why some people ceased to believe in it. In the light of after-War cynicism, it seemed almost too good to be true to those who had not witnessed it. The traitorous Emperor appeared on the world screen at the side of the heroic King, against a background of smoking ruins. Heroes succeeded each other during the occupation of eight provinces out of nine. There was Burgomaster Max, who refused to yield to the enemy’s exactions and stirred the spirit of Brussels, and Cardinal Mercier’s great Pastoral Letter of Christmas 1914, preaching “Patriotism and Fortitude.” Towns, churches, law-courts, universities had their champions—and their victims. Belgium taught the world that terrorism did not pay.

People were more sensitive twenty years ago than to-day. They disliked intensely seeing international treaties flung into the waste-paper basket like mere “scraps of paper.” They strongly disapproved of arson and massacres. The

Hague Convention had solemnly defined the "rules of war," the situation of neutrals, and the rights of the civil population in war-time; it was a shock to see these engagements coolly ignored. The public manifested its feelings by contributing to the fund of the "Commission for Relief in Belgium," organized by Mr. Hoover, which saved the population from famine, by sending gifts to the Belgian Red Cross and comforts to the soldiers. In Great Britain, France and Holland great work was done in helping the refugees. No doubt the ordeal of Belgium was also the occasion for many sentimental manifestations, and ill-informed propagandists spread exaggerated rumours of German cruelty, but the protest of the civilized world rested on solid facts and stood the test of time and criticism. It affected Italian opinion and contributed to a large extent to the gradual change of America's attitude by preparing her fateful decision to enter the struggle.

Nothing shows better the importance of the "Belgian Cause" than the contrast between the effect produced by the invasion of Belgium and that of Serbia. Both nations were faced with an ultimatum, both were ruthlessly attacked and suffered from the consequences of a heroic resistance to superior forces. But Serbia was far away and little known; she was not neutral, her independence had not been guaranteed by the invader, her existence did not directly affect the Balance of Power; in short, she was not the "keystone of Europe."

3

In spite of the indignation provoked by the invasion of Belgium and by the acts of terrorism which accompanied it, public attention might easily have been drawn elsewhere

if the Germans had shown more moderation in dealing with the civil population and more understanding of the country's traditions. A few clever men like Governor von Bissing and his immediate subordinate, von der Lancken, realized that it would have been better, in their country's interest, not to add fuel to the fire and to abstain from unnecessary provocations and sensational executions, but they were powerless against an army of officials who could, if need be, find support in the highest quarters.

Part of the country, behind the front, constituted the *Etappegebiet*, and was placed under military authority, but the same spirit prevailed throughout the land, owing to the influence of the army leaders, who again and again enforced their decisions against the advice of the Governor and his staff. The Belgians were thus subjected to numberless regulations, which they infringed or avoided with remarkable ingenuity. It was forbidden to play the *Brabançonne*, but it was still possible for the women to wear a red scarf, a yellow ribbon and a black dress. It was forbidden to celebrate the National Fête by any display, but it was still possible to close the shops as a sign of mourning. The drastic punishments inflicted in such cases appeared more ridiculous than cruel. This humorous resistance was greatly encouraged by a number of clandestine publications, more particularly by the elusive *Libre Belgique*, printed in disused cellars, and circulated throughout the country by a large organization which survived wholesale arrests and penalties out of all proportion with the "crime committed."*

The German police took almost as much trouble in tracking the printers and distributors of this small paper as in discovering the persons responsible for the flight of allied soldiers left in the country and of the young Belgians wishing to enlist. In certain cases these were treated like

* O. E. Millard, *Uncensored*.

ordinary spies and shot after a summary trial. The terrible fate of Nurse Cavell is still remembered by all, but it is often forgotten that no less than three hundred Belgians lost their lives in similar circumstances.

The worst aspect of the Occupation was the economic exploitation of the country, which was intensified in 1916 and which placed, one more, the "Belgian Cause" in the front page of the news.

Owing to wholesale requisitions, the country soon found itself deprived of all stocks of food and raw material. Foreign markets were closed, transport paralysed and business at a standstill. The people in the towns only escaped famine owing to the timely intervention of the "Commission for Relief," under American patronage, which obtained from the British and German authorities permission to import food through Rotterdam. This food was distributed by a voluntary organization, the *Comité national*, which from the beginning of 1915 was subsidized by the Belgian Government.

Another danger threatened the Belgian workers. Following a systematic plan, the country was gradually drained of all its resources. The number of unemployed reached 650,000 by the end of 1915. As soon as the shortage of labour was felt in Germany, various attempts were made to enlist these unemployed in war industries. These efforts having proved fruitless, owing to the patriotic opposition of employers and employees, German Headquarters decided to compel the men to work and to break the resistance of the recalcitrants by deporting them to Germany. The Governor was obliged to give way in September 1916, although he foresaw that the application of this measure would ruin his plans for keeping the good will of a part of the population and for using persuasion rather than force.

Mass deportations carried out by a ruthless soldiery

revived abroad the anger provoked by the invasion and its worst excesses. The Belgian local authorities having refused to deliver the lists of the unemployed who received relief, the measure was applied to men of all ages and conditions unwilling to sign a regular engagement. For four months the public heard of a series of raids in which no less than 60,000 people were removed to Germany, packed in cattle-trucks, to be employed in the mines or in some other heavy or dangerous work. About the same number of men and women were enrolled in *Zivil Arbeiter Bataillone* and forced to build defence works on the western front, sometimes under the fire of Belgian or allied guns. Owing to insufficient food and ill treatment, the mortality among the latter reached over 4 per cent. within two years.

Once more Cardinal Mercier's voice was raised against the oppressor. A series of protests followed, emanating from the Socialists' and non-Socialist Unions, members of Parliament, local authorities, magistrates, university professors; in short, of all Belgians whose names carried any weight. The text of these protests was made known abroad and provoked deep sympathy in neutral countries, particularly in the United States. For the first time, President Wilson departed from his scrupulous neutrality and sent a note to Berlin pointing out that the deportations "jeopardized the work of relief undertaken in Belgium by American citizens." According to the words of the *New York Times*, "Germany was sending the pacifists to the trenches, since they had now no other means of obtaining peace".* Labour circles in allied countries where "peace by negotiation" began to be discussed were particularly affected by this new form of persecution.

The obstinate patriotism of the Belgian population was also shown to the world by the refusal of the Flemings to

* H. Pirenne: *La Belgique et la Guerre mondiale*.

accept a series of linguistic reforms from the German authorities which they had demanded before the War, such as the reorganization of the University of Ghent. Governor von Bissing's attempt, in March 1917, to introduce administrative separation between the Flemish and the Walloon parts of the country provoked a strike among the Civil Servants. The protection he gave to a small band of "Activists" who had formed the "Council of Flanders" led to a conflict with the Law Courts early in 1918. The liberation of the country came only just in time to prevent complete disorganization.

Thus, while the army was marking time on the Yser front, the civilians, isolated from the rest of the world and subjected to ceaseless propaganda, persecutions and blandishments, preserved an uncompromising attitude and gave an example of moral resistance which was no less valuable to the common cause than the military resistance of the troops. The future of Belgium played an important part in the Allies' war aims. Had the Germans been able to sow disunion among the people and oppose their wishes to those of the King and his Government, the consequences might have been disastrous. The fact that union was maintained under such pressure was the best answer the nation could possibly give to those who denied its historical and political existence.

4

King Albert followed anxiously the news which reached him from the occupied territory. Not that he ever seriously doubted the loyalty of his subjects, but he dreaded the consequences which such loyalty might bring upon them. If they were spared the horrors of famine, they lived a life of

privation which could not be prolonged indefinitely. Mass deportations involved untold moral and physical sufferings. Administrative separation, if it did not disintegrate the State, might in the end prove disastrous to the Belgians themselves by placing all power in the hands of their enemies. While condemning the agitation pursued by the "Council of Flanders," the Government tried, on several occasions, to moderate the conflict between the people and their temporary masters. It was thought advisable, for instance, to allow the mines to produce as much coal as was strictly necessary for home consumption. Civil Servants in certain ministries were urged not to leave their posts. The country must be liberated, but her liberation would be vain if the Germans left only a desert behind them. Any violence which might serve as a pretext for further excesses was strongly discouraged. "I have no right," King Albert declared to a foreign statesman, "to expose my people to cruel reprisals even for the defence of my Crown."*

The Sovereign felt his responsibilities all the more because his situation was exceptional. Parliament could not be summoned, but the Constitution allowed the King to exercise the legislative as well as the executive power "in exceptional circumstances." He governed by decrees, but he never lost sight of the fact that these decrees should be in accordance with Belgian public opinion, and took great care not to take any step which might aggravate the critical situation of those he had not been able to protect.

This was his main preoccupation each time he was called upon to take any decision in the diplomatic field.

Instead of throwing in his lot with the Allies, he preserved the same independence in the various negotiations which took place during the War which he had preserved in the leadership of his soldiers. Belgium was still a neutral State,

* Dumont-Wilden: *Albert I^{er}*.

and as such could claim a privileged treatment and special reparations for the losses inflicted upon her. The King fought for the liberation of his country and sought no reward for the attitude he had taken. He abstained from joining in the Pact of London, in September 1914, in which the Allies undertook not to engage in separate negotiations with the enemy. Such an engagement seemed superfluous. He had given sufficient proofs of his loyalty to the Powers which had answered his appeal, and he would remain at their side until he had fulfilled his constitutional duty of restoring Belgian independence and integrity.

Great Britain, France and Russia recognized the legitimate character of this attitude and, in February 1916, declared spontaneously that "the Belgian Government would be invited to participate in the peace negotiations", and that "they would not end hostilities until Belgium was re-established in her political and economic independence and largely indemnified for the damage she had suffered." In answer to this "declaration," made at Sainte-Adresse, the Belgian Foreign Minister addressed, in the following terms, the three representatives of the Allies who had called upon him: "I am sure that I am the faithful interpreter of my countrymen when I tell you that you may have full confidence in us as we have full confidence in our faithful guarantors." There the matter stood and there it rested until Versailles. At the time when Italy and Rumania obtained certain promises before joining the Allies, it was suggested that Belgium might seize the opportunity of securing some territorial advantages on the lower Scheldt and in Limburg, and of asking the Powers to "repair the injustice committed in 1839." Any move in this direction, in the opinion of the Sovereign, would have been undignified and inconsistent with the Belgian attitude.

In order to strengthen the allegiance of his confederates,

who were beginning to feel the strain of the War, and to shift the blame for the continuation of the struggle on to the Allies, the Kaiser started a "peace offensive," in December 1916, by sending a note to the United States protesting that he had only acted in self-defence. He did not formulate any concrete proposals and it was already evident that he did not mean to restore Belgium. The German Chancellor's attitude had completely altered since his speech of August 1914. On the ground that the discovery of the text of the military conversations, in the files of the Ministry of War, proved the duplicity of the Belgian Government, he had declared repeatedly that Germany would "exact guarantees" in the Belgian question, and that the "restoration of the *status quo* was impossible." The initiative of the correspondence coming from Germany, the Belgians joined in the Allies' note to the United States. A last paragraph stated that "the King and Government pursued only one aim: the re-establishment of peace and law," and that "they would only accept a peace which ensured their country's legitimate reparations and her future security." Although the Allies' note did not close the door upon negotiations, the Kaiser proclaimed to his army and to the world that his enemies had refused his proposals. As for Belgium, she deserved her fate, having "violated the spirit of the treaties" by her pre-War understanding with Great Britain.*

Almost at the same time President Wilson sent to the belligerents his note of December 21st, asking them to define their war aims. In spite of the pressing demand of M. Briand, King Albert insisted, this time, on sending a separate answer to Washington. He wished especially to meet the President's argument that both sides were pursuing the same purpose: "President Wilson wishes that war should end

* De Ridder: *La Belgique et la Guerre*, IV.

as early as possible, but he seems to believe that the statesmen of both groups of Powers have the same war aims in view. The example of Belgium shows that this is, unfortunately, not the case. Belgium has never been prompted, like the Central Powers, by a desire for territorial conquest. . . . If there is a country which has the right to say that she took up arms to defend her existence, it is surely Belgium. She had either to fight or be dishonoured . . .” These words reached the President in January 1917, at the moment when American conscience was deeply stirred by the deportations of Belgian workers. The German reply, on the other hand, included “economic and territorial guarantees” in Belgium and the annexation of the Liège district. There was no longer any possibility of assimilating the two policies. The ground was prepared for the final decision, brought about, two months later, by Germany’s sink-at-sight policy.

The most determined opponents of the violation of Belgian neutrality in pre-War years could not have calculated its consequences. Quite apart from the military obstacles of Liège, Antwerp and the Yser, the moral effect produced had been greater than could have been foreseen. It had alienated neutral opinion, given allied propaganda its most striking argument, and banded against the invader all those whose safety depended on the maintenance of international order. The first wrong might have been forgotten, but the excesses of the occupation succeeded those of the invasion. The restoration of Belgian independence and integrity became the test of Germany’s sincerity during the last years of the struggle. A more moderate peace might have been concluded had the Kaiser and his generals accepted this first point of the allied programme. They never did. Up to the eve of the Armistice, when division prevailed among the civilians and in the army, they refused to surrender the Belgian coast, their strongest position against

England, and the line of the Meuse, which they wished to fortify "against a future attack." This strange obstinacy prevented the conclusion of any "peace by negotiation" and brought about their final downfall.

Most German writers have come to realize to-day that the violation of the Belgian frontier was a disastrous mistake and that the arguments used later to justify it are without historical value. It seems as if the fact that the War ended where it began, on Belgian territory, possessed a particular significance.

5

If peace could not be concluded with Germany—or at least with the German War Lords, since more moderate opinions were already expressed in the country—it might at one time have been possible to detach Austria from her ally. The importance of the secret negotiations conducted between Karl von Hapsburg and his brother-in-law, Prince Sixte de Bourbon-Parme, in the spring of 1917, should be fully appreciated to-day. It is too often forgotten that the young Emperor, who did not share his father's policy, made overtures to the Allies with a view to concluding a separate peace. He wrote to Prince Sixte in February putting forward certain proposals which the latter, on the advice of his cousin, King Albert, communicated to certain French statesmen. After consulting with them, and interviewing Emperor Karl, he obtained from the latter definite proposals which appeared acceptable to both parties. It included the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, Belgian integrity and the restoration of Serbia. Karl von Hapsburg was, however, unwilling to act separately before attempting to persuade his ally. After interviewing the Kaiser at

Homburg and meeting with a curt refusal, he wrote to M. Poincaré repeating his proposals and expressing his willingness to cede part of the Tyrol to Italy. Mr. Lloyd George, M. Ribot and Baron Sonnino examined this offer at Saint-Jean de Maurienne, but owing mainly to the Italian representative's opposition, the negotiations were not pursued.*

It is impossible to enter here into the details of these transactions and their unfortunate disclosure by M. Clemenceau in April 1918. The fact remains that the Allies lost this golden opportunity of shortening the duration of the War and of re-establishing in the centre of Europe a friendly State which might have maintained its independence and restored the Balance of Power. Apart from his friendly advice to the Prince, who served in the Belgian army, King Albert had no means of altering the attitude of the statesmen whose prejudices against the Austrian monarchy he did not share. We can nevertheless assume from later declarations that he deeply regretted the breaking up of the Austrian Empire, and feared its consequences for the peace of Europe. Speaking in 1921 to M. de Lichtervelde, he mentioned that M. de Broqueville "had been the only statesman to realize that Belgium must wish for a peace which would restore the Balance in Europe. He understood the importance of the Austrian offer."†

6

King Albert exerted a greater influence on the relations between the Allies and the Holy See. Although deploring the outbreak of hostilities, the attitude of the Vatican had not been favourable during the first months of the War.

* Lloyd George: *War Memories*, Vol. IV. Sixte de Bourbon: *L'Offre de Paix Séparée de l'Autriche*.

† *Revue générale*, Mars 1934.

The King did his utmost, through personal letters and diplomatic channels, to correct the information received in Rome from Austrian sources. In January 1915 he sent to the Pope a telegram praising the attitude of Cardinal Mercier and, a few days later, the Holy Father seized an opportunity of condemning publicly all violations of international law.

He maintained from that time an attitude of friendly neutrality and, after hearing of the "peace resolutions" adopted by the Reichstag in July 1917, decided to send a confidential letter to all the belligerents in which he proposed the evacuation of France and Belgium in exchange for the return of the German colonies. Once more Belgium became the test of Germany's good faith in wishing to come to an understanding. King Albert answered in a friendly letter enclosing a complete restatement of Belgian aims, and the British Minister informed the Vatican that Great Britain could only enter negotiations after Germany had expressed her intentions with regard to Belgium. In spite of Austrian intervention and of Cardinal Gasparri's repeated requests, no answer was given to this question. According to Chancellor Michaelis's own words, Belgium was "Germany's trump card" and she preferred to keep it up her sleeve.

Although, since the moment America entered the War, the German War Lords must have lost all hope of bringing the struggle to a decisive conclusion, their attitude towards Belgium never varied. Opinion wavered between the advisability of annexing the coast or of bringing the country into the *Zollverein* and securing Liège, the Reich's advance post in the "Second Punic War," but the idea of complete restoration and independence was never entertained. Neither Count von Hertling, who became Chancellor in the spring of 1918, nor his successor, Admiral von Hintze, was

ever able to accept this condition without reservation, owing to the opposition of the military leaders. The latter met again and again in July and August, but refused to the last to re-establish the *status quo*. Von Hintze was rebuked for assuring President Wilson that the Reich intended to do so. The diplomatic history of the last months of the War shows that neither the Kaiser nor his advisers could consent to repair their initial mistake, even when their fate trembled in the balance. An earlier peace might have saved them, but the first condition of such a settlement would have meant the loss of the keystone of Europe and the end of their dreams of hegemony.

King Albert had no illusion on this score and remained indifferent to the feelers thrown out at the time in his direction by various agents. He knew that the Germans wished for peace, but he knew also that as long as their present rulers remained in power they would never release their prey.

CHAPTER XIV

LIBERATION AND PEACE

I

THERE is a strange rhythm in human affairs which brings them to a climax before they resume a more or less normal course. In the life of Leopold I this climax occurs in 1848, when the success of the Belgian experiment is acknowledged all over Europe. The great year of his successor's reign must have been 1885, when he directed from Brussels the negotiations of the Berlin Conference and the creation of the Congo Free State. For King Albert it was undoubtedly 1918, when he was at last allowed to reap the benefit of four years' ceaseless efforts and to enter his liberated provinces at the head of his troops.

In spite of his great modesty, the King was not devoid of pride, but in him this feeling was more collective than personal. He never forgot that he represented his country, and could not ignore any lack of respect or consideration which might damage her interests. From the beginning of the hostilities he had been exposed, not only to the attacks and calumnies of his enemies but also to the patronizing criticisms of some of his "friends." The accusation of treachery left him indifferent, but he resented the taunts of those who described him as the dupe of the Allies' policy. Ferdinand of Bulgaria had called him a fool when he had rejected the German ultimatum. "To-day," he remarked in September 1918, "he must have altered his opinion; he must understand that it is always in a man's best interest to remain honest."

For the first time since August 1914 he had reached the conviction that the Allies were justified in taking the offensive. He had been opposed to all previous attacks on a grand scale, because he believed that they were both premature and wasteful. In a war of attrition, the belligerents possessing the largest reserves in men and material should remain on the defensive until their opponents showed signs of evident exhaustion. These signs appeared at last in the serious reverses suffered by the Reich's allies in Italy, in the Balkans and in the Near East, as well as in the German armies' vain efforts to stem the counter-attacks which followed their great spring offensive.

The initiative had now passed into the hands of the French, British and Americans, who had agreed to place the supreme command in the hands of Marshal Foch. The King had never been officially advised of this decision. When M. Poincaré privately consulted him on the subject, he could only repeat that he was personally responsible for the command of his troops to the nation and could not see his way to delegate his powers to any one else. He felt, nevertheless, that the hour had come to strike a decisive blow in Flanders, and could only be gratified when Foch offered him the command of the "*groupe d'armées des Flandres*," which included, besides his eleven Belgian Divisions, the second British Army and three French Divisions. The situation of October 1914 was completely reversed. Then the Sovereign had been asked to resign his leadership and to place his troops under foreign control; he was now offered spontaneously the command of British and French armies by the same army leader who had criticized Belgian Headquarters during the deadly struggle on the Yser.

King Albert did not ignore the obstacles ahead. The offensive against a series of well-prepared positions was bound to be costly, and he had no reserves. If he succeeded

in making appreciable progress, would not the enemy, in his retreat, complete the country's destruction? As he declared, a few weeks later, "It might take ten, perhaps twenty years for Europe—and for Belgium—to recover from such ruins." He did not, however, allow such thoughts to distract his attention from his main purpose. All difficulties would be easily removed when the Belgians were once more masters in their own land. The few symptoms of disunion which had appeared in the occupied territory, and even for a short time in the army, would soon disappear. It would not be the first time in history that Belgium had risen from her ruins. "Victory will wipe out all that!" he declared.

The tide of material strength against which the King had struggled for so long had turned at last. Numbers, armaments, which had been against him, were now with him. The hour of deliverance, delayed from month to month, in 1914, and from year to year ever since, had struck at last. On September 27th the Belgians left the maze of defence works erected along the Yser, never to return.

2

The offensive of King Albert's armies was directed first against the "crest of Flanders," a series of low hills extending from the Houthulst Wood to the south of Ypres. The position had been strongly fortified, but, in spite of heavy losses, the Commander-in-Chief succeeded in reducing it within two days. A halt was called in order to allow the artillery to follow the troops, and by October 14th the last line of defence had been pierced in several places. Two days later the German units holding the flooded area south of Nieupoort were compelled to retire, followed closely by the

* Dumont-Wilden: *Albert I^{er}*.

Belgian Divisions. The Allies found themselves in open country, advancing towards Courtrai and Bruges.

The King's eagerness to come into touch with his people after his long exile is shown by a surprise visit he made with the Queen to Ostend, a few hours after the evacuation of the town by the enemy. As soon as he heard of the rapid German retreat, Sir Roger Keyes, who commanded the British fleet patrolling the coast, suggested to the Sovereigns that it might be possible to land in Ostend. He took them aboard one of his destroyers at La Panne, but a motor-boat had to be used to enter the port. It was getting dark and the Ostendais, unaccustomed to the new khaki uniforms, took some time before recognizing the group of officers and the lady who were strolling towards the market place. An informal and enthusiastic reception followed in the Town Hall. In spite of their hosts' entreaties, the Sovereigns were unable to remain in the town, which was still exposed to a raid from the enemy. They returned to La Panne with the satisfaction of having been the first to enter a Belgian town freed from German occupation.

On October 25th the Royal family entered Bruges with representatives of the British and French armies, and established their quarters in the neighbouring castle of Lophem. The Belgians were now resting in front of Ghent, while the Germans, who had fought throughout strong rear-guard actions, were fortifying the line of the Lys Canal.

All kinds of rumours spread abroad. Some people mentioned the forthcoming Armistice, but a far larger number spoke of the revolution in Germany and of the danger of its extension to Brussels, where the soldiers were getting out of hand. It was even suggested that part of the Belgian population might follow their example. Although these stories were grossly exaggerated, the German officials were evidently anxious that King Albert should reach Brussels

as soon as possible to "restore order." They asked a Spanish diplomat and two Belgian representatives to see the Sovereign and hasten his arrival.

These gentlemen reached Lophem on November 11th, a few hours after the proclamation of the Armistice. Their news was not alarming, for, except for a few hooligans, the Belgians had no inclination to join with the German rebels. There was no fear of revolution, but there was an urgent need for consultation. For a long time the Sovereign had realized that there existed in the country a prejudice against the "Havre Government." It was necessary to introduce in the Cabinet men who had taken an active share in the protection of the civil population and who were in close contact with it. Political union which had been established between parties during the War must be preserved during the critical period of restoration. These happy days of deliverance should not be marred by regrets or recriminations. All reasonable grievances from Socialists and Flemish quarters must be satisfied and patriotism receive its legitimate reward.

Such were the thoughts which were uppermost in the King's mind when he met the representatives of his people at Lophem on Armistice day, and a more important delegation three days later. The programme of the new Coalition Cabinet, formed mostly by statesmen who had not left the country, reflected the Sovereign's preoccupations and included, among other reforms, general suffrage and important concessions to the Flemish demands. It was essentially a Ministry of reconstruction and reconciliation. It was unbelievable that the Belgians who had helped each other through this great ordeal should resume the petty quarrels of pre-War days on the morrow of their liberation.

The welcome given to the troops and to their leader by the Socialist population of Ghent left no doubt possible as to

the danger of revolution. The people's exuberance was somewhat restricted by the scarcity of their resources and by their physical weakness, after four years' privation, but the spontaneity of their greeting was made all the more touching. In spite of German requisitions, there were still enough bells left in the churches, and flags hidden in cupboards, and wine bottles dug out of the gardens, to greet the "deliverers." The triumphal progress of the Royal family—for the Queen and the Princes rode with the King ahead of the troops—proceeded slowly from Bruges to Ghent, from Ghent to Antwerp and Brussels, along the road followed, eighty-seven years before, by Leopold I. The grandson re-entered his grandfather's kingdom after vindicating the rights of his people.

3

On his arrival in Brussels King Albert rode to the *Palais de la Nation* and addressed the members of the Belgian Parliament. It was the longest oration this concise speaker had ever delivered in his life. After paying due homage to the allied armies, to his own men and to the steadfast resistance of the civil population, he appealed for union in the work of reconstruction as he had appealed for union against the invader on August 1914, union between Capital and Labour, between Catholics and non-Catholics and between the Flemish- and French-speaking population of the nine provinces. "Equality in suffering and endurance," he declared, "has created equal rights." He announced that the Government intended to introduce general suffrage and important linguistic changes, including the reform of the University of Ghent. Nothing but the "sincere collaboration of all the children of the same country, without distinction of

origin or language," could secure success in the difficult task of reconstruction. Social justice implied "a fair distribution of the products of common efforts." Order must be maintained, but "fruitful order does not depend on submission or external constraint, but on the common agreement of hearts and wills (*le commun accord des cœurs et des volontés*)."

This last sentence gives us the key of King Albert's simple and straightforward philosophy, the only one which he could harmonize with his religion. A faithful Catholic, he was also a tolerant Christian, ready to recognize Christian aspiration wherever he found it, even in the disinterested actions of the professed unbeliever. He had a ready understanding of human weaknesses and especially of the obstacles which the poor had to overcome, but he preserved a keen sense of justice. In public as in private affairs the choice between good and evil lay before us, and morality depended on the use we made of our free will. The statesman's duty was to build up within the nation a framework of conditions favourable to moral development, but when all efforts have been made to help the citizen, the common goal could only be reached by the exercise of individual will. Trade and industry should be stimulated, social reforms enforced, science and art encouraged, but neither prosperity, nor the welfare of the poor, nor the achievements of art and science could foster a high degree of civilization unless they brought with them the realization and practice of "moral values." This idea occurs in a large number of the King's speeches; he never misses an opportunity of dwelling upon it. It took some time for the cynics to realize that these words were not spoken in vain and that the man who uttered them was ready to lay down his life to defend the principles which they expressed.

All we know of King Albert's intimate thoughts leads us

to the conclusion that he did not consider constitutionalism as a troublesome restriction or a necessity of the times. He did not, like Leopold II, distrust democracy, he only distrusted demagoguery. He did not suspect monarchy, like the majority of allied statesmen he met in those days; he only distrusted certain monarchs, more particularly those who exercised autocratic power. The ideal State was for him the one which conciliated the maximum of order, which "was the basis of social life," with the maximum of freedom, for without freedom the finest results lost all moral significance. Independence in foreign relations, or individual liberty within the State, were not for him vain catchwords, or fine principles to be exploited by national or class selfishness, but fundamental realities, the very foundation on which true civilization was built.

We may now understand the value of the words with which the constitutional Sovereign opened his speech when he addressed the Belgian Parliament on his return to Brussels. "Gentlemen," he said, "I bring you the greeting of the Army. We have come from the Yser, my soldiers and I, through our towns and our liberated country-side, and here am I before the representatives of the country. Four years ago you entrusted me with the national Army, in order to defend the country in peril. I come to render an account of my acts."

King Albert had never lost sight of the fact that the position which he occupied during the War was exceptional. Many regretted that he did not retain his exceptional powers, at least until the conclusion of peace. The critical situation of the country warranted it and the extraordinary popularity which he enjoyed in all parties would have silenced criticism. But the Sovereign had not only accepted the Constitution, he had adopted it. The reproach of abusing his people's confidence, when they hailed him as their

“Deliverer,” would have been intolerable. Having been in close touch with international events, he knew, no doubt, better than the majority of his ministers the measures to be taken to hasten the restoration of the country and he did not share their optimism with regard to the payments of reparations or the dispositions of the Allies towards Belgium. His personal prestige abroad would have been invaluable in the conduct of peace negotiations. These arguments had no weight against the objection of unconstitutionality. Even if his decision implied certain dangers and delays, he was resolved not to retain his extraordinary power a day more than was strictly necessary.

He had directed the country's policy, driven back the invader and brought back the Army to Brussels. He could show that he had not wasted the lives entrusted to him in any operation which was not essential to the defence and liberation of the territory. This task was completed. On the morrow of his return to the capital he placed his powers in the hands of the new Cabinet formed at Lophem and, after having been the leader, became again the counsellor he had been before the invasion. His duty was no longer to command, but, according to Bagehot's fine definition, “to advise, to encourage and to warn.” He had done his share of the work; it was for the nation and its representatives to do theirs.

According to the clauses of the Armistice, the Allies were to occupy the left bank of the Rhine until the settlement of the Peace Treaty. Belgium co-operated in this occupation. Before relinquishing his command the Sovereign addressed to his troops, on December 1st, a last order of the day, which shows that the fever of victory had not obscured his high sense of justice: “In 1914 the Belgian Army rose against the invader to defend the nation's honour. For over four years we have fought loyally an adversary who,

relying on his strength, had committed the worst abuses. Victory has rewarded our efforts. You are going to enter enemy territory, not in order to exact reprisals but to ensure the execution of the clauses of the Armistice. Soldiers of honour, you will not tarnish your glory; you will, as formerly, fulfil your duty with firmness, but also with loyalty. . . . Officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers, I trust that you will remain worthy of Belgium." A timely warning in all circumstances, but particularly to men who had just passed through their ruined towns and villages, and witnessed the sufferings inflicted upon their relatives and friends during the invasion and recent deportations. The order was obeyed in the spirit in which it was given.

4

The contrast between the position of Belgium in 1914-1915 and the one she occupied at the Peace Conference illustrates better than anything else the change of public opinion during the War. From being the only small State, excepting Serbia, fighting on the Allies' side, Belgium had become one of the twenty-two Powers with "restricted" interests which sent delegates to Versailles, and were reluctantly compelled to leave all important decisions to the representatives of the Powers with "general" interests, that is to say, to the Big Four. With the gradual enlargement of the field of operations and the collaboration of new allies, the European conflict had degenerated into a world conflagration, and "small Belgium" no longer occupied the central position which had given her at first so much importance. People engaged in a deadly struggle have short memories. The violation of Belgian neutrality remained

a favourite subject for platform oratory, but it was overshadowed by more striking events of more immediate import. The initial problem concerned with the protection of the Balance of Power in Europe and the preservation of small States against aggression had receded into the background. The break-up of Austria, in spite of the efforts of the Emperor to conclude a separate peace, and the ambitions stirred up everywhere by the doctrine of self-determination, raised so many questions that the negotiators were faced with the stupendous task of remodelling the map and calling into being a number of old and new nationalities. Beside these practical difficulties, they had also to deal with the framing and the adoption of a brand-new code of law for the settling of international disputes and the final abolition of warfare, for President Wilson insisted that the Covenant of the League of Nations should form an integral part of the peace settlement.

The Big Four did not possess the experience of trained diplomatists, neither did they enjoy the leisure of statesmen whose only task is to negotiate lasting treaties. They were all anxious to come to a decision in order to restore order in a restless Europe, and to return to their respective countries where public opinion clamoured for an early solution satisfactory to national interests and ambitions. In the words of King Albert, "they did what they could," and the world has suffered from the consequences ever since.

Had the War ended in 1916, or even in 1917, at the time of Austria's peace proposals, it might have led to a sensible conclusion, maintaining the Balance of Power in Europe, safeguarding the interests of minor nationalities, and strengthening by new treaties and new sanctions the treaties which had been broken. A great deal had been done for the cause of peace in pre-War days. Compulsory arbitration had been adopted by certain nations and The Hague Con-

ventions had settled definite rules for the limitation of warfare and the attenuation of its cruelty. Neutralization had further provided, for a long time, Switzerland, Belgium and other countries with an adequate guarantee of security. The failure of these efforts provoked a violent reaction. The continuity of history seemed to be broken, old traditions forgotten. The Central Empires, which bore the main responsibility for the conflict, were declared to be solely responsible for it and for the material losses incurred. Austria was dismembered without any consideration for the part which a Danubian confederation had played and should be called upon to play in European history. The amount of reparations to be paid by Germany reached staggering figures. Monarchy was denounced as the cause of all evil, and democracy as the best guarantee against an aggressive spirit. Under the pretext of self-determination, new political and economic barriers arose all over Europe and the problem of minorities was rendered more difficult instead of being simplified. Old and new nations preserved jealously their sovereign rights, but the League of Nations' power to prevent the use of force was strictly limited, and depended, in the last resort, on the good will of victors and vanquished, of the States which appeared to have benefited from the settlement and of those which had only too evidently suffered from it. The War, which had opened with a clear object and for the achievements of some decisive aim, ended in a confused spirit in which a generous idealism was strangely associated with national greed and selfishness.

If the Belgian problem was not forgotten at Versailles, it was certainly neglected. The promise made at Sainte Adresse in 1916 was not kept. Instead of participating in the settlement, the Belgian delegates found themselves sitting beside those of Cuba, Siam and other States which had only contributed to the common victory by breaking off diplo-

matic relations with the Central Powers when their defeat was within sight. They had the greatest difficulty in obtaining recognition that their position as privileged creditors, which had been acknowledged at Sainte-Adresse and in President Wilson's Fourteen Points, should be admitted, and King Albert had to intervene personally in April 1919, in a private conversation with the Big Three, in order that proper attention should be given to them. Belgium obtained at last, after further difficulties, a priority of 2,500 million francs and the remission of her war debts.

In all fairness, it must be admitted that some Belgians were affected by the post-War mentality which afflicted the world. The occupation had lasted too long, the strain had been too severe not to stir up their patriotic ambitions and shake their strict sense of justice. Neutrality, in its old compulsory form, had become unpopular. Such restriction on national sovereignty could not be accepted if it ensured security. The fact that it had largely contributed to the restoration of Belgian independence could not be taken into account by people who had so recently witnessed their country's ruin. Instead of preserving their neutral status within the League, as the Swiss succeeded in doing, Belgium demanded its total abrogation and the revision of the 1839 treaties. A campaign was started at the same time in favour of some territorial compensations, at the expense of Holland, in Dutch Zeeland and Limburg. It was urged that this occasion should be seized to recover the territories lost to the Dutch eighty years before. The Belgian Government never put forward such claims, but pointed out that negotiations should be started in order "to suppress, as much for the sake of Belgium as for the maintenance of general peace, the various risks and inconveniences resulting from the 1839 treaties." It was suggested, for instance, that plans of common defence should be made with regard to Limburg,

and that the status of the lower Scheldt—at present under Dutch sovereignty—should be revised in order to allow Antwerp to receive reinforcements through the river in time of war. If Belgium lost her neutrality, so the argument ran, she should be placed in a better position to defend herself. These demands met with no success.

The recovery of part of the districts annexed by Prussia in 1815, with a population of 60,000 inhabitants and a mandate over the region of Ruanda and Urundi, contiguous to the Congo, were the only “advantages” which Belgium gathered from the Peace Treaty, apart from her share in reparations.

5

The Belgians' disappointment is not difficult to understand. They had been comforted in their resistance by the idea that the attention of the world was still centred upon them, and that they would reap the benefit of their sacrifice. They had repeated the French saying: *L'heure viendra qui tout paiera*. In their isolation they had not been able to follow the course of events and to realize the formidable losses incurred by all belligerents. They lived in the illusion that the resources of their powerful Allies were inexhaustible and that all damages would be made good. They suffered in their *amour-propre* almost as much as in their interests. Their offer of establishing the seat of the League of Nations in Brussels had been calmly declined. They felt that the prominent part they had played in the moral struggle between the two parties, instead of being an advantage, had become almost a grievance against them. Not having moved with the times, they awoke suddenly to the realization that their popularity had already faded and would not yield the fruit which they had so long expected.

King Albert also was disappointed. "Peace is signed," he wrote to his Prime Minister, M. Delacroix, on June 29th, 1919, "it does not yet bring to Belgium the full satisfaction which the achievements of her soldiers and the indomitable resistance of her population seemed to give her a right to expect."* But his disappointment caused him no surprise. As early as October 1914 he had foreseen that "the course of events" would "push Belgium into the background." This was the inevitable consequence of a prolonged conflict, and did not alter the deep gratitude he felt for the loyal support he had received, more particularly in the British Empire, in France and in the United States. He had a keen sense of possibilities. As far as Belgium was concerned, the result of Versailles was not good, but it might have been worse. He was far more anxious about the future of the new Europe which had emerged from these negotiations and the consequences of the new Belgian status, deprived of the shackles but also of the guarantees of neutrality. He had been painfully surprised at the intrigues pursued at Versailles, the extraordinary ignorance prevailing in certain quarters, and the rashness with which momentous decisions had been taken. As a careful student of diplomatic history, he did not share the prejudice prevailing in these days against the maintenance of the Balance of Power in Europe. This system, which was denounced as the cause of all evil, remained for him one of the conditions of the preservation of peace and of the limitation of armaments. No lasting settlement could be made with nations suffering from a persecution complex. True, the Covenant of the League embodied the principles for which he had fought, but its adoption was a bold experiment, the success of which depended on a feeling of mutual confidence which did not exist. The King realized that it was useless to expect

* E. Cammaerts: *Albert of Belgium*, p. 338.

Germany to bear alone the cost of the war, and feared that the Allies' demands, instead of re-establishing friendly relations with the Weimar Republic, might cause an irreparable breach. He deplored, besides, the break-up of Austria, which might have been more easily reconciled to a European Entente and might have prevented the formation of a Germanic *bloc* in Central Europe. As a statesman, he distrusted an attempt to enforce peace all over the world while the only law prevailing in Western Europe was still the law of force; as a traditionalist, he regretted that the lessons of history had been sacrificed to untried novelties; as a Belgian he felt that the cardinal problem raised by the conflict had been neglected, and that essential questions which might have received practical solutions had been sacrificed to an all-embracing scheme which did not reconcile the main interests.

This may be gathered from the Sovereign's private letters and from a few reflections which escaped him during the post-War period. He abstained from venting his personal views in public. It was not for him to volunteer advice which was not asked for. He was powerless to alter the course of events, and it was not in his nature to waste time and energy on vain recriminations. In spite of its defects, the peace treaty was "the basis of the political régime" under which Belgium "must be raised from her ruins. The work of restoration begun, on the morrow of the Armistice, "among many hopes and incertitudes," would now "be pursued among sterner perspectives, but on a well-defined ground, favourable to strong and clear resolutions." The Sovereign ends his letter to his Prime Minister by expressing the hope that the "gravity of present circumstances, understood by all," would again "give to the Belgian people, who had recovered their freedom, the high moral standard which had been their strength under enemy occupation."

CHAPTER XV

RESTORATION AND SECURITY

I

THE two principal demands of Belgium at Versailles had been full reparations and guarantees of security. King Albert had placed these two claims in the forefront of Belgian policy, from the beginning to the end of the War. Owing to the colossal losses incurred by all belligerents the first was only partially met. The solution given to the revision of the 1839 treaties was scarcely more satisfactory. Belgium stood now in the same exposed position, deprived of her old guarantees, sharing with all other small nations the problematic advantages of League membership. Her pride was satisfied but her security was neither strengthened nor insured.

Belgian credit, however, was to a certain extent restored by her priority on reparation payments, granted at Versailles, and the work of reconstruction was pushed actively forward. The task was stupendous. All means of communication, including railways and canals, had been destroyed or obstructed in most parts of the country. The war zone in West Flanders was half marshland, half shell-pocked desert. The ruins round Liège, Namur, Malines and Antwerp still marked the stages of the "great retreat." The number of destroyed homes was estimated at 100,000, not including public buildings. During the last months of the struggle the enemy had taken away or broken up most of the machinery in the industrial districts, exports of machines and

scrap iron being estimated at 50,000 tons per month by the Germans themselves.

The repair and reconstruction of means of communication begun by military engineers proceeded rapidly, and by the spring of 1919 the circulation of goods and travellers was almost entirely re-established. Very rapid and satisfactory results were also obtained by the Ministry of Agriculture, and in 1921 even the flooded area presented an almost normal aspect. The actual work of reconstruction proceeded more slowly, and for a long time the refugees who had returned to their wrecked homes had to find shelter in temporary huts. Similar difficulties were experienced in recovering from Germany part of the machines which had been removed from the southern provinces, and in providing Belgian industries with the necessary plant.

Reconstruction had only been obtained by exhausting the country's financial resources. Belgium no sooner emerged from her ruins than she was faced with bankruptcy. At the time of the Armistice there were 800,000 unemployed in the country who had to be supported. The State had, besides, taken over 7,500 million francs' worth of German marks, circulated in the country during the occupation. By 1924 the sum paid in war damages amounted to 20,000 million francs and the public debt had risen to 45,000 millions. Further German payments in reparations, which had been too readily taken for granted, did not materialize or were considerably reduced. A rapid succession of internal and external loans further upset Belgian credit and in the spring of 1926 alarming fluctuations of the currency compelled Parliament to take drastic measures. The Sovereign was given exceptional powers, and a Coalition Government was formed under M. Jaspar for the special purpose of restoring the situation. After reaching the low level of 217 francs to the pound, the franc was at last stabilized at the rate of 175, after

a drastic increase in taxation and the conversion of the State railways into a private company under State control. A large redemption fund was formed and, three years later, the financial position of the country was redeemed.

2

The King had witnessed with serious apprehension the course of events which led to the crisis of 1926. He had warned his ministers on several occasions that a regular and full payment of Belgium's share in reparations was not to be relied upon, but his scrupulous respect for the Constitution prevented him from more active interference. His scruples were increased by the abuse of executive power made in other countries in order to solve the pressing difficulties of the after-War period. Besides, he could only use his influence impartially in many questions if political union was maintained, and he soon discovered that the hopes he had cherished on this point after the Armistice were to be disappointed.

The elections of 1919, under the new régime of general suffrage, had sent to the Chamber 73 Catholics, 70 Socialists and 34 Liberals. During the two following years, the Coalition passed a series of social measures, such as income tax, an increase in death duties and old-age pensions, and old-age insurance. The old conflict between State and religious education, which had poisoned the political atmosphere in pre-War days was solved to a great extent by the grant of equal subsidies to all schools. Unfortunately, this democratic policy provoked a reaction among the "bourgeois" parties, and a violent campaign launched in 1921 by the Socialists in favour of the reduction of military service to six months brought about a breach.

By that time budgetary difficulties had already hampered the Government and the Sovereign chose as his new Premier a non-party man of considerable financial experience. M. Theunis was supported by a Catholic-Liberal majority, but his efforts to resolve the budgetary position were hampered by the divisions which arose among his followers about the reform of the University of Ghent and other questions of minor importance.

In 1924 the Socialist opposition was joined by the left wing Catholics, or Christian democrats, who also claimed the reduction of the period of military service and the completion of the programme of social reforms undertaken by the previous Government. Some discontent existed among the Flemings, owing to the conclusion of the military agreement with France followed by the joint occupation of the Ruhr. The elections of April 1925 having strengthened the Socialist representation, a new coalition was formed under M. Pouillet, the leader of the Christian Democrats, with M. Vandervelde at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Then came the disastrous crisis of 1926. Instead of asking for the resignation of the Democratic Cabinet when the Chamber conferred upon him exceptional powers, the Sovereign insisted on restoring the union of all parties and of including in the new Coalition Government a business man of great energy, M. Francqui, who was mainly responsible for financial reforms.* A year later, however, the Socialist Ministers, dissatisfied with the policy pursued by M. Jaspar, returned into opposition.

Union could only have been maintained by the sacrifice of security and the introduction of a six months' military service. However inclined the Sovereign might have been to favour this popular reform, he did not consider that the international situation justified a further weakening of the

* See p. 202.

Belgian forces, which had been considerably reduced after the Armistice. Europe was restless, France and England had drifted apart, and the prestige of the League was already on the wane. The King urged the appointment of a mixed commission, including deputies and military experts, which finally decided in favour of a term of eight months. Their resolution was ratified by the new military law of 1928. It was agreed that a small and exposed nation could not give up its armaments, as long as all the great Powers had not come to an agreement and put it into practice.

These were particularly trying years for King Albert. The disinterested spirit shown during the War had been succeeded in Belgium, as in other belligerent countries, by a reaction towards selfishness. The short period of prosperity following the restoration of the country had improved social conditions without appeasing class rivalries. Political unity, which Leopold I had maintained for fifteen years at the beginning of his reign, had scarcely lasted two years, in spite of the urgency of combining all efforts to overcome ever-recurring economic obstacles. For the first time in Belgian history, disruptive forces were threatening the State itself. Some of the seeds of dissension sown by the Germans during the occupation had borne fruit. Communism had made some progress, and a small but active number of Flemish extremists had declared themselves in favour of the separation of the country into two separate linguistic and "racial" units. This movement, which had almost completely disappeared after the liberation of the country, had been revived by the deliberate hostility shown in certain quarters to moderate Flemish demands. Reaction followed reaction. In December 1928 the ex-President of the Council of Flanders, who had been condemned to a term of imprisonment, was elected in Antwerp, and a few months later eleven Separatists, or "frontists," were returned to the Chamber. They were

still without serious political influence—6 per cent. of the House—but the fact that even a minority pursued such a policy when Belgium was preparing to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of her independence could not but provoke some bitter reflections.

In order to satisfy the legitimate demands of the Socialists, the Sovereign had favoured general suffrage. He realized that a great deal of the agitation which now threatened Belgian unity was the natural consequence of the electoral reform. In the past, Belgium had always been decentralized. Under the new democratic regime she could not accept the linguistic conditions prevailing in the nineteenth century, when the middle class alone could make its influence felt. Instead of denouncing the movement as a whole, the Sovereign applied himself to show that while regionalism—the love of native language and traditions—was perfectly justified, a “narrow particularism” would bring about the ruin of the very ideas it was supposed to defend. He seized the opportunity of a number of visits he paid to the principal Flemish and Walloon towns during the centenary celebrations to emphasize this point, and to explain that Belgian unity and independence were the essential conditions of Belgian communal and provincial life. His voice was heard. The tone of the Press altered. A number of linguistic reforms were adopted in the administration of the country, and the University of Ghent was at last given a new status. These concessions checked the extremist tendencies of the Flemish movement which rallied under its moderate leaders.

3

“Victory” had not wiped out the evil effects of the War. Reparation had not prevented financial disruption.

Harmony, social and linguistic, had not been maintained and, above all, security, which Belgium had bought so dearly, was not yet established.

The first effect of the abrogation of neutrality had been to displace the axis of Belgian policy. Had it been possible to restore the Concert of Europe at Versailles and to allow Germany to take her seat in the Council of the League, this might not have occurred. But it took no less than six years before the gulf between conquerors and conquered could be bridged at Locarno. Meanwhile, Belgium was compelled by circumstances to depart from her traditional policy of impartiality and disinterestedness which she would have adopted had she been released from her obligations as a neutral under normal conditions. Even if the 1839 treaties had not compelled the country to accept a neutral status, voluntary neutrality on the Dutch or Swiss model would have been the only régime under which her independence and integrity could have been maintained. In the key position she occupied, she could not have sided with one of her two powerful neighbours, without increasing the danger of a European conflict and exposing herself to aggression or to an alliance which would sooner or later have led to annexation. Indeed, the success of the old neutrality had only been due to the fact that it corresponded to the country's geographical and historical position in Europe. The Conference of London had required from Belgium a duty which she had no means of avoiding, even if she had had the right to do so. The Flemish population could not submit to French rule; neither could the Walloon population accept German rule. Their union since the Middle Ages had been the condition of their privileges and of their existence as a separate political unit.

For the first time in history this situation altered when, in 1918, Belgium notified the Allies that she wished to be

released from the shackles imposed upon her by her former obligations, and to rely henceforth on her own army and on "the permanent interest of the Allied Powers in the existence of a strong and free Belgium." Article 34 of the Peace Treaty, while giving full satisfaction to this request, did not specify the guarantees which the country would enjoy in the future. It seemed, however, at the time that the promise made to France by Great Britain and the United States would indirectly benefit Belgium and that further security might be found in Articles 10, 11, 12 and 16 of the Covenant. Nevertheless, the country's destiny was thus linked up with the "interest" shown by a group of Powers in which Germany was not included. From being of a normal character, her policy had become one-sided.

Subsequent events showed the danger of this new departure. The United States did not ratify the Peace Treaty, and Great Britain was automatically released from her obligations. In order to avoid complete isolation, Belgium was compelled to conclude, in September 1920, a military defensive agreement with France which was interpreted abroad, and even in Belgium, as implying a definite alliance. Although the agreement was not a regular treaty and reserved the right of both countries to organize their defences as they deemed fit and to decide when an act of "unprovoked aggression" had taken place, it further narrowed the field of Belgian policy and provoked external and internal reactions detrimental to Belgian prestige.

It must be added that the Belgian Government had every reason to believe that they might soon complete this agreement with France with a similar agreement with Great Britain. The draft of such a convention was even prepared in London in 1921 by Lord Curzon and the Belgian Ambassador, but its ratification depended on Franco-British relations. Had the convention discussed at Cannes in

January 1922 between Lloyd George and Briand, been concluded, Belgium would have obtained the dual guarantee of security which she was striving for, but Cannes failed, and the two Powers drifted further and further apart. The climax of Belgian one-sidedness was reached when Belgian troops entered the Ruhr the next year. The country was considered everywhere as a mere "satellite of France."

In her search for security, Belgium had seen first America and now Britain secede from the Versailles guarantee. She could only rely on the French agreement and on the sanctions provided by the Covenant. The failure of the efforts made at Geneva, in 1924, to define and strengthen these sanctions by the well-known "Protocol" showed further how unwilling Great Britain was at the time to assume continental commitments and how illusory had been the hope of those who believed that the Covenant could ever provide a solid foundation to the security of a small exposed State.

The dramatic proposal of a pact of mutual guarantee made by Stresemann, on February 25th, seemed, however, to restore the situation and to give Belgium the chance of returning to her traditional policy. The Treaty of London of December 1925, following the Locarno Conference, contained a special "pact" signed by England, France, Germany and Belgium, securing the inviolability of the Belgo-German and Franco-German frontiers under the joint guarantee of Great Britain and Italy. Its preamble mentioned particularly the abrogation of Belgian neutrality as one of the reasons which had inspired the negotiations, and the necessity of "ensuring peace in a zone which had been frequently the theatre of European conflict." The pact confirmed the clauses of the Peace Treaty referring to the non-militarization of the left bank of the Rhine.

The relief with which the conclusion of this treaty was received in Belgium shows how restless the country had

become during the two previous years. Locarno appeared far better than the Franco-British guarantee, for which several Governments had been seeking in vain since 1919, for this time all the country's neighbours were concerned in her security. Belgium was no longer a "satellite of France" or even of the Allies; she enjoyed all the advantages of a much wider guarantee without suffering from its inconveniences. The preamble referring to her exposed situation on the map sounded almost as the echo of one of Palmerston's famous protocols. Once more, in new words and in a new spirit, the Powers proclaimed that the maintenance of Belgian integrity was the condition of European order. The keystone seemed set once more in its former position.

4

The general *détente* provoked by the "Locarno spirit" of reconciliation restored for a time international co-operation. The Reich entered the League in the following year and, in 1927, an International Economic Conference gathered at Geneva for the purpose of stimulating exchanges, restoring credit and lowering the tariff barriers which hampered everywhere the economic recovery of Europe. In August 1928 the Powers, this time including America, signed a "peace pact" against war, and the next month, the ninth Assembly of the League adopted a "general act" submitting to arbitration all international conflicts, whether judicial or political. The conference held at The Hague further reduced German obligations and, in answer to Stresemann's request, the Allies evacuated the Rhineland four years before the time prescribed in the Peace Treaty.

However gratifying these results might have been, they came too late to prevent the deterioration of the fragile

structure created at Weimar, and the development of national ambitions in a world oppressed by an intense economic depression. While the Nazi party was making rapid progress in Germany, Japan struck a deadly blow at the Covenant by attacking China in Manchuria. The year 1931 marks a turning-point in international policy. Sanctions were not applied, Japan seceded from the League and was allowed to reap the benefit of her conquest, in defiance of all international engagements. Never was it shown more clearly that a promise not kept is worse than no promise. It was already plain that treaties and covenants would no longer prevent an aggressive nation or group of nations from seizing their opportunity, unless they were prevented from doing so by a more powerful or equally powerful combination of nations. After twelve years of ideology, the world was compelled to return to the brutal realism of the Balance of Power.

Looked at in this light, the Pact of Locarno, which was now the only serious safeguard of Belgium, presented certain disadvantages. Through a strange oversight, no mention had been made of the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg which was bound to Belgium by a customs union. On the other hand, the guarantee of the frontier between Belgium and Germany did not apply to Dutch Limburg, which remained exposed to invasion. While the Treaty of 1839 protected all boundaries from all aggressors, the new system considered only the eventuality of an invasion from the East. Besides, while in pre-War days Belgium enjoyed the guarantee without any further responsibility—apart from the maintenance of neutrality—she was now both “guaranteed” and “guarantor,” having undertaken to defend the Eastern frontier of France as well as her own. Such pledges did not seem dangerous as long as France did not extend her obligations in Central and Western Europe, but might

become so if her policy provoked a rearmed Germany to take preventive action against French intervention in a conflict in which Belgium was not directly interested.

This aspect of the Locarno Treaty appeared still more clearly when it was contended in the Belgian Chamber by the responsible ministers that the treaty was by no means incompatible with the Franco-Belgian military agreement of 1920, which remained apparently effective. Such policy must have led to some confusion, since the defensive agreement was manifestly one-sided, while the main feature of Locarno was its "mutual" character. It provided for the defence of Germany against Belgium and France as well as for the defence of France and Belgium against Germany. In the circumstances, it was difficult to understand how a close contact between French and Belgian Staffs could be reconciled with the "spirit of Locarno," which implied impartiality. Speaking in the Chamber in March 1931 M. Vandervelde declared that "the Franco-Belgian defensive agreement was incomplete; it was directed against a certain country." "What gives to the Locarno Treaty its moral and political value is that it is a treaty of mutual guarantee directed against no one (*dans lequel il n'y a de pointes contre personne*)."

For all these reasons, the régime under which Belgium lived after 1925, while showing a considerable improvement on the situation prevailing during the two former years, did not appear as entirely satisfactory. It was safe as long as Franco-German relations remained friendly, but it was at the mercy of the slightest accident if jealousy and suspicion divided the two Powers again. The idea that Belgium might be dragged into war through a conflict in Central or Eastern Europe was sufficiently distasteful. The suggestion that she might be invited to side with Germany against France could not be entertained.

Such was the situation, unsatisfactory but by no means critical, when King Albert lost his life in a fatal accident while scaling the cliffs of Marche-les-Dames, on February 17th, 1934. It seemed a bitter irony of fate that the hero who had deliberately exposed his life on the battlefield in order "to encourage his soldiers," and had run serious risks in mountaineering, should perish in taking what he considered almost as a daily exercise, among rocks eighty feet high. It was deplorable that such a valuable life should be cut short by a fortuitous mishap which might so easily have been avoided. What was sport and even physical fitness compared with the invaluable services the great Sovereign might still have rendered to his people and to the world, with the wound his loss inflicted on his family and on millions of loving subjects? Such reflections should be tempered by the thought that the King, when plagued by political worries and preoccupations, could only find relaxation in exercise.

At the age of fifty-eight he had retained his youthful appearance. Body and mind were intimately linked together in his philosophy. To be a good and wise statesman was not enough. Sportsmanship provided fresh resources to his moral energy. He confessed that he had to leave from time to time the close atmosphere of his study and forget the constant strain of the council room. Political intrigues were uncongenial to him. He could not indulge, like his grandfather, in the subtle game of European diplomacy, neither could he, like his uncle, exercise his power in the creation of a great colony. Sport was his only means of escape, and he treasured the short "holidays" he could snatch occasionally from the worry of public affairs and the tediousness of public ceremonies. Answering those who begged him to be more careful in his flying and climbing

expeditions, he protested that he "took every precaution," but if the truth be told, he had grown very fond of taking risks, and felt keenly the excitement and attraction of danger. It is only natural to regret it, but it is not easy to say whether he might have acted as he did throughout a noble and stainless life if his character had been different in this respect. There is always a touch of recklessness in the wisest heroism, and King Albert was built on heroic lines.

The deep mourning into which the nation was plunged provoked some heart-searching questions. It had been frequently asked before whether a Sovereign was worthy of his people. The Belgians asked themselves during these fateful days whether they had proved themselves worthy of the great and good man who had devoted his whole life to protect their independence and their interests. Had they listened to him in pre-War days, when he urged them to prepare for the worst and give him the means to defend them? After the stern lesson of the War, had they given his appeal for union and patriotism the answer it deserved? His return in 1918 should have been followed, not only by cheers and acclamations but by concrete and solid proofs of their understanding and loyalty. They should have closed their ranks as he asked them to do, sacrificed their class and individual selfishness, silenced their linguistic rivalries, forgotten their old grievances, and bent all their strength towards overcoming the unexpected obstacles which confronted them in the economic as well as in the political field. They should have understood better the motives which prompted him to relinquish the reins of government, and showed him, by their closer union, that they appreciated them. They should have facilitated his task instead of complicating it, and lightened his burden instead of increasing it. People went on repeating: "Had he but known, had he but known how he was loved!"

We never realize so well the value of a friend until he has left us. When this friend is a monarch whose actions and words have been a blessing to millions of people, the collective sorrow which follows his death develops a new consciousness. The passing of King Albert meant for Belgium the passing of an epoch. In their grief, people realized that they had missed a glorious opportunity. They had been given a unique example of courage and constancy and had not had the strength to follow it to the end. The body of their lost Chief, stretched out at the foot of the cliffs of Marche-les-Dames, became the symbol of their self-reproach. After reaching the summit of many Alpine peaks, he had failed to scale these chalky Belgian cliffs. So had they, emerging from the fire of war, failed to overcome the smaller obstacles of peace. But their failure was due to no accident.

6

King Albert raised the Belgian Crown to a dignity it had never reached before. His merit, in August 1914, was not so much in rejecting the German ultimatum—his predecessors would have done the same—but in rendering this rejection effective. Had he not, with his young Queen, achieved such popularity at the beginning of his reign, his subjects would not have shown the same loyalty to King and country during the German occupation. Neither would the troops have been so ready to hail him as their leader and to accept, for his sake, the sacrifices he demanded from them.

Of his achievements as Commander-in-Chief of an ill-prepared and badly equipped army, it is scarcely necessary to speak here. Liège, Antwerp and the Yser rendered

incalculable services before the collaboration of the Allies' armies had been secured. The fact which needs emphasizing, however, is that when the authors of the Constitution of 1830 entrusted to the future monarch of Belgium the defence of the country, they had no idea that he would actually conduct all operations from Headquarters during a long and severe campaign. It seemed enough that he should delegate his power to some competent general and exercise some control over military affairs. It never occurred to them that to fulfil this constitutional obligation, the Sovereign would be compelled to assume full responsibility and even to override the decisions of superior officers.

From the Belgian point of view, the greatest service King Albert rendered during the War was to avoid encirclement and to keep at least part of his small army on Belgian territory. While collaborating whenever possible with Allied Commanders, he succeeded in preserving his independence even after the fall of Antwerp. The moral influence exerted by the Army and its leader on the civil population in the occupied territory cannot be exaggerated. The people did not despair as long as they knew that the "King and his men" were fighting to deliver them. For that reason alone the result of the battle of the Yser was nothing short of providential, and this battle was decided and planned by the King himself against the advice given him by the finest soldiers of France.

It is certainly a significant coincidence that Belgium should have been compelled to defend her rights as a neutral in King Albert's reign, and that the Sovereign who so faithfully fulfilled his obligations towards Europe should have observed his constitutional oath with the same scrupulous loyalty. This respect for public and international law is the link which binds together King Albert's internal and external policy. He never hesitated in doing

his duty, whether it applied to Belgium or to Europe. At home and abroad he was guided by the same principles, by the same moral values.

It is sometimes suggested that the extension of the suffrage has weakened the parliamentary system, and that the inclusion in the electorate of a large number of uneducated people, without political traditions, has led several countries towards some form of dictatorship. In other words, democracy, as the expression of collective enthusiasm or of the herd instinct, is supposed to kill democracy, as the expression of the calm deliberations between the chosen representatives of political parties. It is also contended, particularly in France and in the United States, that democracy is incompatible with monarchy and must necessarily be associated with a republican form of Government. Neither of these generalizations applies to Great Britain or to Belgium, but the Belgian example is perhaps more striking, owing to the sudden change which altered political life at the end of the nineteenth century.

The violent attacks of the Socialists against Leopold II and the latter's haughty attitude towards them had estranged the Crown from the Labour party. As heir to the throne, Prince Albert had already shown his understanding of social problems and his active sympathy for the conditions of the industrial classes. After his accession, he made a point of placing the Socialists exactly on the same footing as the Liberals and the Catholics. He considered himself as the Sovereign of the whole people without any distinction of class or creed. His simplicity overcame the strongest prejudices, and he had no difficulty in establishing contacts with a number of politicians and writers professing the most advanced views. The ordeal of war strengthened these bonds. In his Coalition Cabinet the King gave as much confidence to his Socialist advisers as to the other members

of the Government. He was guided by his individual sympathies more than by any party feelings, and honoured all the "men of good will" and ability who collaborated in the common task. It soon appeared that, far from weakening the monarchy, the advent of democracy had greatly increased its influence. The King was no longer placed between the alternative of choosing his ministers among the representatives of one or the other of the two *censitaires* parties. Politics had become far less rigid owing to the influence of social reformers from the Left and from the Right. The Crown was no longer identified with the "governing classes." It remained above political conflict, and enjoyed a far greater authority. The broadening of political life had also broadened the foundation of the Sovereign's prestige. He stood for the whole people, and his voice, raised from time to time during periods of crisis, was heard by all as the expression of the wishes of the whole people. "The power which presents the greater analogy with the monarchy," he declared in 1933, "is the judicial power. Like the King, the magistrates must exert their action above passions and parties."

In December 1909, on the eve of Prince Albert's accession, the Council of the Socialist party issued a manifesto proclaiming that Albert I would "govern, like his uncle, with the support of the banks, the big industries and commercial houses," and that he would be "a tool in the hands of those who enrich themselves through the work of the labourers by oppressing them." There was no "possible reconciliation" between Socialism and monarchy. Contrast these words with those of the party's leader, Vandervelde, in an article published twenty-four years later, immediately after the King's death: "Those who, less in Belgium than abroad, have reproached us with the betrayal of our republican principles in becoming, in agreement with our party, the

King's Ministers, simply proved that they knew nothing of the personality of the first citizen of Belgium and of the country's institutions. King Albert was the ideal incarnation of this 'Republican Monarchy' which the authors of the Constitution wished deliberately to create in 1831."

7

The King had been remarkably reticent during the post-War period, but after the crisis of 1926 he intervened more frequently. His scrupulous respect for the Constitution did not blind him to the fact that if Belgium was to overcome the difficulties provoked by the economic depression, there should be some continuity in the Government's policy. He wished, however, to justify his decision, not only to Parliament but to his whole people and made frequent use of a device which has become in Belgium a constitutional usage. It was in 1857 that Leopold I addressed a public letter to his Prime Minister which was widely reproduced by the Press. His successor preferred to express his opinions, particularly on national defence, in public speeches which frequently embarrassed his ministers. Albert I, who disliked oratory, resumed the old tradition, which allowed him to address himself to all his subjects and to advise them in difficult times.

After being given exceptional powers to deal with the financial crisis of 1926, he wrote to his new Prime Minister a letter which was evidently addressed to the nation, urging the people to remain confident and united in the face of the new peril which threatened them. Far from criticizing parliamentary delays and procrastinations which were partly responsible for the ruin of the country's credit, he concluded: "Our institutions are sufficiently supple to allow the Govern-

ment to use . . . the means necessary to cure the evil from which we are suffering. Under a régime of free discussion, if public spirit remains sound, if it does not wander in search of rash solutions, it is impossible that a practical agreement should not finally be reached . . . ”

Having righted the ship and relinquished, after six months, the exceptional powers conferred upon him, the Sovereign succeeded in preventing a series of political crises which would have jeopardized the country's economic stability. In 1930 M. Jaspar wished to resign because he did not feel that he enjoyed sufficient support among the members of his party. The King refused his resignation, explaining that ministers depended on the Chamber, not on their party organizations, and that he did not wish “to create a most dangerous precedent.” Three years later he refused to accept a surprise vote in Parliament, provoked by the nomination of a burgomaster in a small commune, as sufficiently important to provoke a ministerial crisis. “The country would not understand,” he wrote, “that the fate of a Government which has undertaken to restore the nation's financial and economic situation could depend on the validity of a village election.” A few months later he intervened once more, when the proposal of reinstating certain Civil Servants somewhat hastily condemned after the Armistice provoked considerable agitation. Let competent judges deal with this judicial problem, he declared, and let the Government continue their work.

Each time the King acted firmly, within his constitutional rights, but each time he took great trouble to explain the reasons which prompted his decisions. He agreed that the Executive should be strengthened, but denied that the system of parliamentary governments was irreconcilable with post-War conditions. All that was needed was a sense of proportion. “Let us preserve our reputation for good sense,

moderation, wisdom and energy," wrote the King in 1926. It is in appealing to these characteristics of the Belgian temperament that he won his greatest political victories.

It should, however, be added that the new conception of kingship which inspired the Sovereign reflected by no means a loose ideology adaptable to all circumstances. It was firmly set in the frame of the State and harmonized with all opinions as long as those opinions found their expression through Parliament and the regular institutions of the country. Whenever he had an opportunity of doing so, King Albert did not hesitate to oppose every movement which, through direct action or otherwise, attempted to win some advantage at the expense of the community. Socialism should not degenerate into Communism, regionalism into separatism. In the same way, the advocates of a strong Executive might easily go too far. He would have been the last to play into their hands. Exceptional powers should only be assumed by the Sovereign, when requested to do so, during a short period and for a stated purpose. Such powers should never be delegated to a Prime Minister, however masterly. Dictatorship from the Right or from the Left seemed to him equally incompatible with the dignity of modern kingship.

CHAPTER XVI

FATHER AND SON

I

THE contrasts which we have noticed between the reigns of Leopold I, Leopold II and Albert I are reflected in the characters of the three Sovereigns and in the influence they exerted on the destiny of the nation. The founder of the dynasty, living in the Liberal era, applied himself to consolidate the diplomatic structure of the new State. His successor, foreseeing the plight in which his people would find themselves if they did not secure some outlet for their activity, applied his genius to colonial and economic expansion. He combined the character of business man and national leader.

It was King Albert's ungrateful task to preserve what his predecessors had achieved: Belgian independence and prosperity. He had no leisure to plan and contrive. Coming to the throne five years before the catastrophe, he had scarcely the time to prepare himself for the ordeal. Instead of being allowed to rest after his hard-won success, he was besieged, during sixteen years, by the harassing problems of the post-War period. After vindicating his country's right, he had to bear all the weight of her moral and material reconstruction, fighting disunion at home, political rivalries, linguistic differences, and endeavouring, at the same time, to pilot the ship of State through acute financial difficulties and a period of unprecedented depression. The Belgians themselves were only partly responsible for these troubles. Some ministers had been unduly

optimistic about German reparations, others had been over-hasty in granting social reforms which burdened the budget at a time when economies were imperative. But, on the whole, the solution of post-War problems did not so much depend on the policy of the Belgian Government as on general conditions independent of internal politics, such as the closing of foreign markets, the growth of prohibitive tariffs and other impediments to trade, and the necessity of maintaining and increasing armaments, owing to the failure of the League of Nations to cope with international difficulties.

Long before King Albert's death, international experts were already agreed that no serious improvements could alleviate the world depression unless normal trade relations were gradually restored. Such a change was unfortunately impossible as long as certain States pursued a narrow self-sufficient policy, while others were unwilling to make sufficient concessions to foster a spirit of collaboration and good will. The same obstacles which paralysed Belgian industry threatened Belgian security. As soon as Leopold III ascended the throne, the situation grew steadily worse, but this situation was only the natural development of past events. It is therefore impossible to establish a contrast between the last two reigns, as between those of the first three Belgian Sovereigns. The son was faced with the same difficulties which darkened the last years of his father's career. Inspired by his example, he faced them with the same courage and determination. According to King Albert's own words, he was "quite prepared" to assume the responsibilities of power.

2

It is impossible to understand the policy of Leopold III if we do not remember the character of this preparation.



A RECENT PORTRAIT OF H.M. LEOPOLD III
BY ALFRED JONNIAUX

DATE LOANED

Acc. No. _____

[illegible]

It was founded on affection, discipline and mutual confidence.

Prince Leopold grew, with his younger brother and sister, in the privileged position of the eldest boy of a happy family. Neither court etiquette nor the ceremonies which frequently compelled King Albert to absent himself were allowed to affect his relationship with the Queen and the Princes. She was for him "his wife," they were "his children," and he claimed the right to live at home freely and independently like the least of his subjects. He made two parts in his life. As a Sovereign he fulfilled his duties with the greatest zeal and devotion, but as a private citizen he wished his privacy to be respected. In Queen Elisabeth he had found a true helpmate, a trusty adviser who shared all his preoccupations. One of the Sovereigns' constant cares was to strengthen the bonds which linked them to their children and to prepare them for their future task. They shared their holidays with them and associated them, whenever possible, with the public functions in which they took part. But familiarity did not exclude discipline and, from his early boyhood, the Duke of Brabant, as he was called since becoming heir to the throne, learned that his position involved some exacting duties. King Albert had inherited the dynasty's belief in education. The time-table could not be trifled with, and obedience was implicit.

The War shattered this happy existence when the Duke was scarcely thirteen years old. His father had been his hero before he became a hero to the world. He witnessed the King's departure for the Front and shared his mother's anxiety during the tragedy of Antwerp. After the first Zeppelin raid on the town, it had been decided that the Royal children should accept Lord Curzon's invitation to go to England. As soon, however, as the Front was stabilized behind the Yser, they returned to their new home, the simple

villa, on the sea-front, at La Panne. Family life was resumed under strange conditions. The Princes accompanied the Queen when she visited military hospitals or the schools she organized in West Flanders. The King spent most of his time at Headquarters, but when work was not too pressing he took them for a walk along the shore. He talked to them of "his men," of their endurance and devotion. Young Leopold resented the circumstances which kept him with his younger brother and sister in La Panne. He wished to see the trenches, to share the life of the troops. His imagination was stirred by the great story of the Yser, the miracle which had saved his country, as the Marne had saved France. One day he claimed the privilege of enlisting as a private.

Such a demand was without precedent, owing not only to Leopold's early age but also to the fact that no Belgian Prince had ever served in the ranks. But the situation was also without precedent. The King understood his son and granted his request. On April 5th, 1915, he introduced him to his regiment, the XIIth of the Line, standing in square formation on the sea-shore. "Soldiers," he said, "princes must be brought up in the school of duty, and none is better than an army like our own which represents the Nation heroism. My son has claimed the honour of wearing the uniform of our valiant soldiers. He will be particularly proud to belong to a regiment which, by its courage and patriotic devotion, deserves to be mentioned in our national history." Taking the Colonel apart, he expressed the wish that the Prince should be subjected to the same discipline as his comrades. He should dig trenches like the others in order "to know what it is to have blistered hands."

The War went on. After six months it became evident that the Prince could not remain indefinitely in the army. His education, interrupted a year before, had to be com-

pleted; he needed the companionship of boys of his own age. King Albert, who, as a sportsman, had for long nursed an admiration for English public schools, thought of Eton, and invited the headmaster, Dr. Lyttelton, to come to La Panne to talk matters over. It is characteristic of him that at the end of the interview he expressed the wish that "Leopold should not get too fond of games."* Evidently he had gained the impression that, in comparison with continental schools, Eton was a paradise for budding sportsmen, and sport should be a means, not an end.

Prince Leopold, remained at Eton for over two years. Every holiday, when his schoolfellows went home, he returned to La Panne and to his regiment. He did not neglect his work, but his mind wandered frequently towards the last strip of Belgian territory which his father was defending against the invader. No school life in the world could compare with the life he had led during the first year of the War, no school triumph could stir his enthusiasm like the great return when, after a hard-won victory, he rode beside his father and mother in their "good towns," to the accompaniment of mad cheers, while the bells rang from every steeple.

It is this dramatic background which we must keep in mind if we wish to understand the formation of the young King's character. His outlook is similar to that of Albert I, but his manner is different. To use a remark often heard in Belgium, "he does not smile so easily." At the most sensitive age of a boy's career, he was compelled to confront reality in its most brutal aspect, and had to steel his energy to face it. Fate struck him again and again in later years, but these early experiences had left their mark. He had gone through fire.

* From a letter of Dr. Lyttelton to the Author.

When he ascended the throne, Leopold III not only swore to remain faithful to the Belgian Constitution, he took a more exacting engagement: that of being true to his great predecessor's memory. Peace had not altered his hero-worship. At the age of thirty, his admiration for the brave, kind-hearted and wise Sovereign who had devoted his life to his people and country remained as vivid as in the fateful period of exile at La Panne. The boy believed that it was only possible to fight on the battlefield; the young man soon understood that peace also had its struggles, and that the anxieties of a constitutional monarch in his study could prove as absorbing as those of a Commander at Headquarters.

Prince Leopold enjoyed an advantage which had been denied to his father and to his uncle. As soon as his military education was completed, in 1922, he had been initiated in statesmanship and had become, in certain matters, the King's confidant and collaborator. Certain Belgian ministers, notably M. Theunis and M. Jaspar, had been asked to give him the benefit of their knowledge and experience in the management of public affairs. Aware of the difficulty of assuming unprepared the responsibilities of power, the Sovereign had decided that his son should not suffer from the disadvantages which had hampered his own initiative when he ascended the throne. While encouraging the Prince to travel and to increase his knowledge, especially in colonial questions, he lost no opportunity of bringing him into contact with his future subjects and training him in the hard "trade" of kingship.

The Duke of Brabant made no less than a hundred and twenty public speeches before his accession. The first

dates from 1920, when he was only nineteen. If we exclude the journeys to the United States (1919), to Brazil (1920), to Egypt and the Sudan (1923) and prolonged absences in 1925, when he visited the Congo for the first time—1928–1929—when he spent six months in the Dutch Indies (1932), when he completed his explorations of Borneo and Indo-China, and 1933, when he returned to the Congo on an official visit, no month passed without some function over which he was requested to preside. The Duke soon became popular among soldiers, sportsmen, local societies and scientific circles. He spoke Flemish as fluently as French, which was a source of great satisfaction to those who resented the prejudice existing in certain circles against their mother tongue. His marriage to Princess Astrid, celebrated in 1926, and the birth of their children, Joséphine-Charlotte, Baudouin and Albert, increased this popularity. History repeated itself. When he announced the betrothal of his son with the niece of the King of Sweden, King Albert had been careful to explain that it had not been prompted by political considerations and was the result of mutual affection. He rejoiced, he said, over a decision “which was reached quite spontaneously.” The same wave of affection which had greeted Princess Elisabeth on her arrival in Brussels, twenty-six years before, greeted Princess Astrid when she landed in Antwerp. The young Duchess, following the Queen’s great example, showed an active interest in the poor and the welfare of the children. She learned both languages and was soon able to mix with the people. Once more the Belgians looked with delight on a young Royal family which appeared as the sure token of a happy future. In his private as in his public life, the heir to the throne was walking in his parents’ footsteps.

Like his father, in his youth Prince Leopold showed a keen interest in serious studies, but while the first centred

his attention on social questions, the latter was more attracted towards natural history, particularly botany and entomology. During his two voyages in the Far East he gathered a great deal of information on Dutch and French colonial methods, and was able to compare them with Belgian methods in the Congo. He became his father's trusted colonial adviser, and was able to confirm, through his own visits, the conclusions reached by the Sovereign. A close connection can be established between the reports drawn up regularly by Prince Leopold in 1925, King Albert and Queen Elisabeth's official visit to the colony in 1928, and the journey undertaken five years later by the Duke and Duchess of Brabant. Again and again the Sovereign had insisted on the paramount importance of safeguarding the health and welfare of the native population. This was not only an essential moral duty, but the condition of future prosperity. In order to fight sleeping sickness and other tropical diseases, he had encouraged the initiative taken by the Queen in 1930 in establishing a special Fund for medical assistance to the natives. The same year the *Institut de Médecine tropicale Prince Léopold* was founded in Antwerp. Not only did King Albert avail himself of his son's knowledge, but he frequently alluded to it. Speaking to one of his Ministers in 1926, he remarked: "Yes, my son has been able to notice great and happy changes, but the situation of the natives is not sufficiently improved compared with what it was ten years ago." He remained convinced that the crux of the problem was to place the natives in a position "to sell, not so much their labour as the fruits of their labour."

4

Several points made by King Leopold in his "inauguration speech" are interesting in the light of recent events. He fully

realized, he declared, "the extent and importance of the responsibilities he was assuming," but relied on "the example given him by his three great predecessors." He would never forget that, "according to the tradition they had established," devotion to the public cause had always been associated with the monarchy. This had been the "constant care and great virtue" of his "deeply beloved father."

Speaking of the country's Constitution, he used almost the same words which King Albert had used before on several occasions. Belgian institutions, which had stood the test during a century, were "sufficiently broad-minded, sufficiently supple" to be adapted to the necessities of the time. Such was his father's "absolute conviction" which, "following his example," he "shared whole-heartedly."

With King Albert, Leopold III considered that an "independent and indivisible Belgium was a historical factor in the European equilibrium." Belgium will "continue to contribute, as in the past, to the organization of peace," but will at the same time make "all necessary sacrifices in order to safeguard her territory and her liberties." Here again the young Sovereign echoed the views of his predecessor. While encouraging his subjects to take a greater interest in the League of Nations and approving the activity displayed by Belgian statesmen and experts at Geneva, King Albert had from the first insisted on the danger of sacrificing Belgian defences to an ideal which had not yet been realized. As long as the League had not given concrete proofs of its authority and as its principles had not been applied by all great European Powers, it would be impossible, he insisted, for a small and exposed country like Belgium to ignore the eventuality of a new grouping of nations and the necessity of maintaining the balance between opposing forces. Nothing showed conclusively that the new system adopted at Versailles had removed rivalries and antagonism. There

were already signs that the redrawing of the map of Europe, after the War, and the redistribution of colonies and mandates might provoke fresh difficulties.

The young King had not forgotten the words spoken by his father when he introduced him to the students and professors of the Military School, fourteen years before. "Since 1830 . . . my predecessors and myself have always been convinced that Belgium, whether neutral or not, must have a good and strong army. This necessity appears still evident to-day to those who consider, with a sense of reality, the situation of Europe, strongly divided by a dangerous settlement (*par un redoutable règlement de comptes*).” If we consider the deep affection and the intimate relationship which bound father and son, we may be sure that such public warnings were frequently repeated in private. The policy pursued by Leopold III at the beginning of his reign shows that they did not fall upon deaf ears.

A last passage of the first public speech of the young Sovereign is worthy of notice, from the point of view of this spiritual heredity. It is the one in which he speaks of the prominent part played by “intellectual and moral forces” in “the development of a people.” We recognize here a favourite theme to which King Albert alluded frequently. Security is not enough, prosperity itself is not enough, all the sacrifices and the efforts of the nation will be of no avail unless they contribute to the spiritual common weal, to the development of these “moral values” of truth, goodness and beauty which is the ultimate aim of true civilization. The young King was so conscious of it that he could not refrain from recalling the initiative taken by his father in creating, in 1927, the *Fonds de Recherches scientifiques* which had done so much to save pure science from neglect during the post-War period. Had time allowed it, he might also have reminded his audience of the foundation of the new *Académie*

Royale de Langue et de Littérature françaises, the building of the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* and many other tokens of King Albert's keen interest in intellectual activity. He might also have spoken of the *Parc national Albert*, the great preserve organized in the Congo, in which, as a naturalist, he was particularly interested. Had not the preservation of nature been the main subject of the remarkable address he delivered, as Duke of Brabant, when he came to London, in November 1933, as a guest of the African Society? He contented himself in declaring once more that "in this domain," as in all the others, "his keenest desire was to follow the road" which his father had traced "with so much foresight."

5

There is one question which King Leopold did not mention in his "inaugural" speech, but which played, nevertheless, a great part in the formation of his character and which brought him into close contact with his great predecessor. King Albert was a deeply religious man. Although he did not wish to profess his faith in public, knowing that a large number of his subjects did not share it, and in spite of the fact that he never allowed religious prejudices to influence his policy or even his friendships, his private talks and correspondence show that the moral values of which he spoke so often were based on a deep and unshakable belief.* He wished Cardinal Mercier, for whom he had the deepest admiration, to take an important share in Prince Leopold's education. For the son as for the father, courage and faith were interdependent, and courage was the keynote of kingship.

There are only few occasions in which Leopold III ex-

* See Cammaerts: *Albert of Belgium*, p. 418.

pressed his personal philosophy of life, but it is nevertheless evident that it is founded on the same guiding principles which sustained King Albert during the severe trials of his career. Six months after his father's death, the young monarch spoke before the clergy assembled to greet him at Sainte-Gudule, on the occasion of the *Te Deum* celebrated at the anniversary of Belgian independence. "Happy are those who are able to turn towards our Lord," he said, "and find in their faith the courage to overcome the trials of life; and strong are those who can find in this faith sufficient energy to fulfil their duty." He was thinking, no doubt, of his recent grief, and could have had no premonition of the tragedy which, a year later, was to wreck his domestic happiness.

This last blow was too cruel to be mentioned in public. It was not until February 1937, at the time of the official visit to Brussels of the King of Sweden, that Leopold III made a passing allusion to it. "I wish to tell you," he said at a dinner given on this occasion, "how much I appreciate the fact that you should be my first guest since the irreparable grief which has stricken me." We can only appreciate the Sovereign's moral attitude by his conduct. On the morrow of his father's death, he had spontaneously taken the vacant place in the Royal study. He scarcely allowed this new calamity to interfere with his public duties. Work was resumed after the motor accident at Küssnacht, as it has been started after the tragedy of Marche-les-Dames.

At the annual *Te Deum* of July 1937, the King expressed his belief that, according to Cardinal Mercier's words, it is impossible to be a perfect Christian without being at the same time a perfect patriot. The solution of the problems which oppressed the world could only be found in "the practice of charity between individuals and between nations."

More recently the Sovereign has referred on several occasions to this practical idealism which is the dominant note of his life, as it was that of his predecessor. It seems as if he had derived from personal experience a firm conviction that only a spiritual power can, in the last resort, alleviate the sufferings of the individual, improve social conditions and prevent the calamity of another world war. Receiving a delegation of the *Association catholique de la Jeunesse belge*, in December 1937, he remarked that at a time when so many people sought nothing but pleasure, "it was comforting to notice that some of the élite of the country devoted themselves to leading the young towards higher aspects of life and showing them the priority of moral values." A month later, speaking to the representatives of the legislative, judicial and administrative bodies who had come to the Palace to present their New Year wishes, he alluded to the "feverish and troubled times" which followed the War and added that "the moral and spiritual renaissance (*redressement*) of the people must be the first object of their pre-occupation." He returned to the subject last July with more precision when he confessed his belief that "the love of one's neighbour, the sense of duty, of truth and justice are virtues which, if practised, would spare mankind most of its trials and anxieties."

Such professions of faith would not carry much weight if the people did not realize that the King was as good as his word. It is the example which matters to them. What impresses them more than anything else is the abnegation with which the Sovereign sacrifices his own inclinations to the service of the country. Just as his father did before him, he gives up any holiday, any relaxation from public work on the mere chance that his presence in Brussels might be needed. During the last international crisis he never left his post, working incessantly from early morning until

late at night, forgetting his meals, snatching only a few hours' rest when circumstances allowed it. The Belgians know that for him, as for his father, the nation stands foremost in his thoughts. Whatever happens, duty remains. "My dear and regretted father," he remarked in 1934, "used to say that the dynasty must remain faithful to its duties, and continue to work incessantly, with absolute abnegation and devotion, to the greatness of the country. This should be the highest and only ambition of Princes who have had the honour to be called to preside over the destinies of a free people. My dearest wish will be to seek inspiration in my father's ideas, in all questions and on all occasions, and to teach the same feelings to my sons. I have no doubt that the communion of thought established between the dynasty and the representatives of the nation will continue to assert itself and to place the superior interests of the country above all other interests."

6

This principle is no doubt in the Coburg tradition, but beside the Coburg tradition stands what one might call the "Albertian tradition." Both Leopold I and Leopold II worked incessantly, like their successors, for Belgian security, independence and prosperity. There are, however, new features in the personality and the policy of the last two Sovereigns which are peculiar to them, and they are connected with their Christian outlook on life. This insistence on "moral values," this belief that the ultimate aim of civilization lies in spiritual more than in material development, and that the latter should be of no avail if it did not condition the first, belongs to the twentieth more than to the nineteenth century. So does the conviction that courage

and energy can be trained and strengthened by physical exercise and that the practice of sport, which led King Albert so frequently to the Dolomites and brings his son almost daily to the golf course, is one of the most healthy and comforting relaxations given to man. Again, the idea that a Prince has a perfect right to follow his own inclination in choosing his wife, and to preserve in his private life the same freedom as his subjects, is a new feature in the history of the Belgian dynasty. Leopold I and Leopold II recognized the Constitution as a necessity, not to say as a necessary evil. They were loyal to it, but never accepted the conception of "republican kingship" which it implied; they remained at heart aristocrats. The Albertian tradition is different. It accepts the Constitution and encourages its development. By extending the suffrage and broadening the basis of political life, the latter allows the Sovereign to come into direct contact with the people and to stand above partisan or private interests, instead of being obliged, as in the old days, to choose his ministers either among the Liberals or among the Catholics. Institutions appear to-day far less rigid than fifty years ago; they are, to use the words of King Albert and his son, "supple" and "adaptable" to new circumstances. Changes have occurred in the past, other changes may occur in the future. The Sovereign preserves his prestige as the supreme arbiter watching over the common interests of all citizens, irrespective of class or party. His life is bound with that of the whole nation. His duty is not only to watch over Belgium and the Belgians; he must watch with the same care over the Congo and its natives. The insistence with which King Albert dwelt not so much on developing the colony as a source of income but on safeguarding the interests of its population is again characteristic of the new regime. His son emphasized this necessity with still greater vigour as early as 1925, and in a

remarkable speech delivered in the Senate in 1933. Whether we turn to private and public life, home or colonial questions, we are struck by the same analogies.

There are, however, certain differences between the two Sovereigns, partly due to their individual character, partly to the tragedy of the War, which darkened Prince Leopold's youth, and partly to the critical circumstances among which the young King assumed the responsibilities of power. The tragedy of Marche-les-Dames was soon followed by serious difficulties at home and by the quick disintegration of the European system on which the security of Belgium depended. The last four years have been years of constant changes and quick decisions. Quite apart from the shock of the two terrible blows which struck him so unexpectedly, Leopold III has had to take initiatives and solve difficulties which might well have exhausted the resources of the most experienced statesman. His very success adds to his responsibilities, since it prompts many people to appeal to him whenever they think that the moral or material interests of the nation are threatened. During the last period of his reign, King Albert felt compelled to interfere more frequently to appease political or linguistic differences and to safeguard the country's defences. In spite of the fact that he enjoyed a unique prestige among constitutional monarchs, there were evident signs that he felt the strain of public affairs. His cloak fell on younger and less experienced shoulders at the very moment when the situation in Europe was rapidly deteriorating. It needed all the young Sovereign's ability and firmness to surmount these new obstacles as well as his personal grief. The effort has given him a stoic attitude, strange in a man of his years. He spends long hours in his study in the Palace, where the eye seeks in vain for a picture or a work of art, and only finds the shields of the nine provinces and the maps of Belgium

and the Congo. Nature alone is allowed to intrude, through the windows opening on a shelter where the neighbouring birds flock eagerly, knowing they will always find food prepared for them. Beside the golf course at Laeken, there are games with the children in the park and, from time to time, political weather permitting, short trips incognito to Switzerland or the Tyrol and a few mountaineering expeditions.

King Albert had every reason to be proud of his son and to declare that he was well prepared to assume the succession. The test of these four years has been as drastic as destiny could make it. It includes, besides an irreparable personal loss, grave financial trouble, political unrest, and an international crisis of the first magnitude. The King's courage, his clear-sightedness, his eagerness to help, his high sense of duty stand unimpaired. The Belgians are justified in congratulating themselves and in repeating on every occasion, "*Tel père, tel fils.*"

CHAPTER XVII

TOWARDS UNION AND PEACE

I

THE urgent measures taken in 1926 to prevent the depreciation of the currency* might have restored Belgian prosperity if exports had not suffered shortly afterwards from the general economic depression which affected the whole world. While revenues decreased rapidly, expenditure on social services and armaments could not be curtailed. When Count de Broqueville succeeded M. Jaspar in December 1932, the Treasury was faced with such difficulties that the Government had once more to ask for "special powers." Taxes were considerably increased and a number of decrees taken in order to reduce expenses. In spite of these efforts, the budgetary situation remained critical, owing to the loss in revenue which, in 1934, amounted to 40 per cent. of the 1929 figures. Hampered by dissension among the Catholic-Liberal majority, M. de Broqueville resigned in November 1934 and King Leopold asked M. Theunis to form a new Cabinet.

It soon appeared, however, that as long as the Government relied on the "bourgeois parties" alone, no drastic reform could be accepted by the country without stirring class suspicions and social unrest. When, therefore, M. Theunis resigned in March 1935, the Sovereign took a bold initiative. He called upon a man without political experience, a professor at the University of Louvain and vice-

* See p. 297.

governor of the National Bank. The advent of M. van Zeeland was a new departure in Belgian politics. Himself just over forty years of age, the new Premier enlisted the collaboration of young men belonging to the three main parties. Experience had shown that a policy of taxation, even when combined with retrenchment, only led to an impasse. The only way Belgium could extricate herself from her difficulties was by stimulating production. Armed with renewed "special powers," M. van Zeeland stabilized the franc at 150 to the pound and succeeded in preventing a corresponding rise in the cost of living. The profits derived from this slight devaluation amounted to 4,350 million francs. Exports rose to 9,093 million in 1936, while the corresponding imports reached 10,194,000. Unemployment was brought down from 291,000 men in January 1935 to 151,000 in May 1936. In spite of a lowering of taxation amounting in two years to 911,000 million, the Government succeeded in balancing the budget. Belgian currency and credit had never been so sound since the War.

2

Nothing shows better the obstacles which confront, in present circumstances, the Government of a small country than the influences which brought about the resignation of M. van Zeeland's first Cabinet. While his predecessors had been unable to conciliate a democratic policy, involving large expenses on social services, with the necessity of maintaining a sound budget, he had succeeded in reviving industrial activity while realizing a number of reforms urged by his Socialist supporters.

No doubt M. van Zeeland would have reaped the full benefit of his efforts had not his prestige been undermined.

by political unrest. This unrest can only partly be explained by the conditions prevailing in Belgium at the time. It was to a great extent the result of the conflicting tendencies which have so gravely disturbed Europe during the last five years, and brought her recently to the brink of war.

Answering, in July 1934, an address presented to him by a large number of Belgian associations, King Leopold had uttered a timely warning. The country was a "large national association" and could only pass successfully through her trials if the people remained united. Echoing King Albert's words, he asked them to "forget their differences" and "to remember only their common bonds." Two years later, the Sovereign expressed himself still more plainly. Speaking in Brussels on the occasion of the centenary of the Provincial Law, he said: "The atmosphere in which we live is not limited by the walls erected on our frontiers; it is subjected to the influence of extreme currents. Fortunately, as these come closer to our homes, they become calmer and more peaceful. We owe this to the suppleness and soundness of our institutions and to the sense of reality which is characteristic of our people." The allusion to the conflict between communistic and totalitarian tendencies was plain enough.

By that time the political "atmosphere" had been deeply disturbed by the results of the elections of May 1936, in which the Socialists had obtained 70 seats, the Catholics 63 and the Liberals 23, while the Flemish Nationalists had doubled their strength from 8 to 16, the Communists increased their numbers from 6 to 9, and a brand-new party, the Rexists, sent to the Chamber no less than 21 members, nearly as many as the century-old Liberals. To anyone acquainted with the slow-moving Belgian electoral machine, under proportional representation, these changes were certainly startling and showed that, in spite of the fruitful

results of M. van Zeeland's policy, a large minority remained opposed to the Government of "National Union."

The progress of the Flemish Nationalists was not alarming, for they no longer aimed at dividing the country, as they had done a few years before. Their separatism had gradually taken the form of a strong federalism and was less deliberately hostile to the Belgian State. The success of the Communists was no doubt due to the participation of the Socialists with the new Coalition Government, which strengthened extremism within and outside their ranks. But the sudden rise of Rexism under the leadership of M. Degrelle, a young man of thirty whose name was almost unknown two years before, was more startling. Its rapid success could not be explained away by the eloquence of its leader and by the extreme violence of his personal attacks against a number of influential politicians. The appetite of the crowd for scandal and its susceptibility to sensational methods of propaganda are not unlimited. The Rexists had launched a campaign in their meetings and in their widely distributed paper, *Le Pays réel* (an expression borrowed from M. Maurras), not only against political corruption but against the parliamentary system itself. They had advertised their intention to revise the Constitution in order to reinforce the power of the Executive and to curtail the privileges of the Chamber. They had denounced the compromises of successive Coalitions, and upbraided the slowness and inefficiency of a régime which could no longer cope with the urgency of modern problems. They had made their own the criticisms uttered by Fascist and Nazi leaders against democracies, and many people asked themselves whether, after adopting certain of their arguments, they would not also adopt their methods. The presence in the Chamber of twenty-one deputies ready to denounce corruption and abuses might help rather than

hinder sound methods of government, but the influence Rexism had been able to gain in so short a time over a large number of electors was certainly alarming for those who wished to maintain the Constitution unimpaired. Herr Hitler's first electoral success had also been modest. . . .

So far, however, the Sovereign's hope that "by coming closer to Belgian homes" the movement "had become calmer and more peaceful," has not been disappointed. If Rexism is, as some people contend, a new decoction of Fascism, it is a very Belgian decoction. Violence of language has not been followed by physical violence and, on the whole, it must be recognized that the Rexists have made good their claim of using only legal means to further their views. In its origins the movement was mainly directed against political and financial corruption and its first successes were largely due to the fact that M. Degrelle was able to substantiate some of his accusations before Belgian Courts. Rexism affects mainly the small middle class which in Belgium, as in other countries, has had to suffer severe losses during the post-War period and has to a certain extent been sacrificed to the conflicting claims of Capital and Labour. Dissatisfaction had been considerably increased two years before by the mismanagement of certain banks, such as the *Banque du Travail* and the *Boerenbond*, which in the Flemish and Walloon provinces jeopardized the savings of a large number of small property owners. It was exasperated by the attacks of international Communism and by the apprehensions caused by the equivocal position in which Belgium was placed before her international obligations were clearly defined. "Rex or Moscow" became a catchword. Rexism exploited the distaste of the small bourgeois for State Socialism and "super-Capitalism," and expressed, in some quarters, a reaction against a materialistic conception of the State which limited

its action to economic and social problems and disregarded moral issues, such as the "dignity of man," "human solidarity," "the respect due to woman," the love of work and order.* The very name of Rex, an abbreviation of *Christus Rex*, reminds us that Degrelle and his collaborators began their work in the *Association catholique de la Jeunesse belge*. There is a mystical as well as a demagogic aspect to the movement which must not be ignored. If the leader was, on certain occasions, rebuked by the Crown and by the Head of the Church, it was not because he had attacked them but because, in the reckless propaganda he pursued, he had boasted of enlisting their support.

3

During the crisis which followed the 1936 elections, the Sovereign stood aloof from political passions and maintained the most scrupulous impartiality. He had taken the initiative in furthering military reforms and already realized the necessity of strengthening the country's position in a divided Europe. Since the denunciation of the Rhine Pact, complete independence appeared the only policy consistent with the new grouping of the Powers. It was more than ever urgent that unity should be maintained during the negotiations which would bring back the country to a status of neutrality.

King Leopold made a point of consulting the leaders, not excepting the Rexists, Flemish Nationalists and Communists. It was only after he had ascertained that none of them would assume the responsibility of forming a Government that he once more asked M. van Zeeland to take over

* P. Daye: *Léon Degrelle*.

the Premiership, at the head of a Catholic-Liberal-Socialist Cabinet.

The Premier pursued the same policy which had yielded such fruitful results in the previous year. Further progress was made both in the economic and in the social field. Exports and imports reached, respectively, 12,940,000 and 13,995,000 million francs in the first six months of 1937—an increase of nearly 3,000 and 4,000 million on the figures of 1936. The number of unemployed was further reduced by 43,000. But in spite of these results and of the success of the international negotiations engaged with Great Britain and France releasing Belgium from her obligations under Locarno, public opinion remained restless and the Premier did not recover his former prestige.

The root of the trouble must no doubt be sought in the repercussions provoked in Belgium by the series of incidents which threatened European peace and in the passions loosened by political fanaticism. Several other circumstances contributed to weaken the Government's position. The very fact that the financial crisis had been overcome revived party rivalries within the Coalition. Confronted by the determined opposition of the Rexists and Flemish Nationalists, M. van Zeeland did not wish to demand new "special powers" in order to expedite urgent measures. In April 1937 he accepted M. Degrelle's challenge to fight a by-election in Brussels which further embittered the political conflict and provoked on both sides violent and unjustified accusations. The Premier was represented as the tool of his "Communist allies" who were processing the streets of the capital with crucifixes held upside down and blasphemous streamers. M. Degrelle was caricatured, opening the door of Belgium to a raving Führer ready to ravish France. The Government won a decisive victory, but the personal reputation of

M. van Zeeland suffered from the excesses of the propaganda carried out by his followers. The whole affair, with its screaming loud-speakers, noisy demonstrations and counter-demonstrations, sensational posters and cartoons, seemed somewhat unreal to most people, and both sides lost ground in public esteem.

No sooner had the excitement of the Brussels by-election calmed down than M. van Zeeland was faced, in May 1937, with fresh difficulties. A bill granting amnesty to ex-public servants condemned for their attitude during the War met with serious opposition. The Cabinet was accused of "sheltering traitors" and dishonouring the country in order to satisfy its Flemish supporters. Ex-service men were especially loud in their protests and sent a deputation to the King asking him to organize a referendum. This method of popular consultation, on the Swiss system, had been advocated by Leopold II, at the time of the first revision, and more recently by certain publicists who, with the Rexists, insisted on the necessity of bringing fresh power to the Executive. The King answered, however, that he could not depart from his constitutional attitude. He could only advise, act *par voie de conseil*. Besides, the bill was not, as contended, an attack against national dignity and the honour of the heroes of the War. He assured the delegates "categorically" that "this honour and dignity" remained "intact."

The Sovereign refused to accept the resignation tendered, on this occasion, by M. van Zeeland, and maintained him in power. Like King Albert, he considered that secondary questions should not jeopardize the economic recovery of the nation. By that time the Premier had been entrusted by Great Britain, the United States and France with the task of pursuing an enquiry into world economic conditions. It was while he was engaged on this work, visiting the

United States, that the amnesty campaign had been launched against his Government. Union had been maintained in the Coalition as long as Rexism appeared threatening. After the April elections it was hastily assumed that all danger was over and every party felt inclined to resume its independence. The amnesty, although unimportant in itself, was just the kind of question which would cause trouble because it opposed Walloons and Flemings, divided the Catholics and, to a lesser extent, the Socialists, and alienated the Liberals. The Rexists seized this opportunity to avenge their defeat. They resumed their tactics of personal attacks, this time against the Premier himself. He was first accused of having received certain sums from the National Bank after entering the Government, and later of having condoned some irregularities in the Bank when a vice-governor. Tired of two years of strenuous work and anxious to pursue to the end the important task entrusted to him, M. van Zeeland finally decided to resign.

A long crisis followed, aggravated by the personal rivalry of party leaders, and it appeared at one time as if King Leopold would have to cancel his State visit to London, planned for November 16th. In spite of the difficulties which confronted him the Sovereign decided to fulfil his engagement, but asked a veteran statesman, M. Janson, who had retired from political life, to pursue negotiations during his absence. The Liberal leader was able to report satisfactory progress when he met the King in London before his departure, and it was during the return journey that the composition of the new Government of National Union was settled. Thus, without loss of time and without impairing national prestige, this four-week crisis was finally brought to an end.

The programme of the new Cabinet did not differ in any important particular from that of the previous one. The new Premier endeavoured to carry out the programme set

forth by his predecessor, but the depreciation of the French currency upset all calculations and once more the situation of the Treasury compelled the Government to increase taxation and effect unpopular economies. M. Spaak, who succeeded M. Janson, in May 1938, had the great satisfaction of witnessing the success of his foreign policy during the September crisis.*

It becomes more and more evident that for all countries, but more particularly for a small industrialized country like Belgium, economic stability is not based on national but on international foundations. The story of Belgium during the last fifteen years shows that no nation, more particularly no democratic nation, can reach financial stability as long as general conditions are not improved. Again and again, successful efforts towards economic restoration have been thwarted by world depression and world unrest for which the country is not responsible. No individual statesmanship can remove obstacles which affect all States. No single nation can restore order in international chaos.

4

Writing to his Prime Minister in 1932, before the signature of the agreement of Ouchy, King Albert had insisted on the necessity of removing or at least of reforming the system of customs barriers, surtaxes, quotas, control of exchange which paralysed international trade. "It has been conclusively shown," he added, that "a concerted action of the States towards international solidarity can alone cure the grave evils from which the world is suffering. It is time that this solidarity should assert itself otherwise than by speeches."

As early as 1927 the International Economic Conference

* See *Appendix* for later developments.

held in Geneva had voted a resolution declaring that the time had come to "make an end of tariff increases and to aim at their reduction." The Assembly of the League had adopted, in 1929, a policy of "concerted action," and the Customs Truce Conference of 1930 had led to a Trade Convention, checking arbitrary increases. But these platonic resolutions had never been ratified by the big Powers, and all that emerged from them was the Oslo Convention of December 1930, affecting the group of small neutral countries of North-western Europe, and the Ouchy agreement of 1932 between Belgium, Holland and Luxemburg, which could not exert any serious influence on account of British opposition.

By that time, owing to the world depression and the disturbance in gold prices, new obstacles had been raised in the shape of quotas and exchange controls. The tripartite agreement between Great Britain, France and the United States, in September 1936, which coincided with the devaluation of the French currency, included a declaration urging the "weakening of the quota and exchange control systems," but the agreement was limited to the three countries concerned. It appeared more and more that no serious remedy could be found to the evil of trade restrictions and its political consequences, unless an agreement were reached between the majority of the big Powers, including the totalitarian States.

It is for this purpose that M. van Zeeland undertook his enquiry and drafted his well-known report published in January 1938.

5

After establishing contact with the various Governments, either personally or through M. Frère, in the principal

capitals, including Berlin and Rome, M. van Zeeland reached the conclusion that, although some countries had adopted a policy of self-sufficiency, none of them wished deliberately to withdraw from the comity of nations. In spite of their differences, they all declared themselves in favour of some joint action aiming at removing the obstacles to world trade.

Taking this for granted, M. van Zeeland examined the best means of removing these obstacles. There should be a truce in custom duties ; quotas on manufactured goods should be abolished and agricultural quotas, even if justified, should not be increased. As regards currency, the tripartite agreement of 1936 should be revised and, if possible, extended to other countries wishing to join in the movement, since final stabilization can only be the result of the restoration of normal trade conditions. The abolition of exchange control—by far the most harmful restriction adopted in recent years—should be reached by the liquidation of frozen debts and agreements for debt adjustment. The Bank of International Settlements might provide credits to assist countries willing to give up exchange control.

As politics are outside M. van Zeeland's terms of reference, he merely mentions a few outstanding questions. The problem of raw materials and colonies, for instance, might be solved by the transfer of mandated territories to international control, and the extension of the system of the "open door" already practised in the Congo basin. The uneven distribution of capital, on the other hand, which places certain States at a disadvantage in the economic field, can only be corrected if guarantees are obtained concerning the use to be made of capital facilities.

As to the practical steps to be taken in order to carry these resolutions into effect, the report suggests the conclusion of a Pact in which the contracting parties would under-

take to give up certain practices opposed to the common interest, and to examine in a friendly spirit all trade difficulties which may impede the restoration of normal relations. After the conclusion of this general Pact, the great economic Powers—namely, Great Britain, France, the United States, Germany and Italy—might examine the most urgent practical measures to be taken. The agreement reached between the great Powers might then be extended to others, and a series of bilateral and general conventions signed at an international Conference.

The impartiality of M. van Zeeland's report has never been questioned. It aims first of all at bringing once more together, through practical economic proposals, the nations which have drifted further and further apart through the initial mistakes made at Versailles and through the period of vain negotiations which followed. It is an attempt to break through the vicious circle of action and reaction which brought the world to the brink of disaster in September 1938, and might still provoke a new and more dangerous crisis unless drastic measures are taken in the near future. It is free from political or theoretical prejudices and shows that democratic and totalitarian States "have had recourse to measures of their own, differing widely in conception and effect but all inspired by the idea of national protection, while, on the other hand, they have all continued, and must continue, to submit to a system of international exchange." Putting aside economic doctrines and political bias, M. van Zeeland has attempted to prove that, if a spirit of collaboration can be restored by the removal of national grievances, a new agreement may be reached in which the particular interest of each State would no longer impede the common interest of all, namely, the improvement of the standard of life.

Commenting on the report, on the morrow of its publica-

ton on January 28th, *The Times* wrote: "M. van Zeeland has undoubtedly made a valuable contribution to the cause of international collaboration. It is now for the Governments to do their part." Five months later Mr. Stanley, speaking of the report in the House of Commons, declared that the time had not yet come when any practical step could be taken towards economic appeasement. "Could anybody," he asked, "believe that the method proposed by M. van Zeeland was likely to succeed, in view of the increase of the political tension in Europe during the last few months?" Since then this tension has increased to breaking point, first owing to the *Anschluss* and, later, during the crisis over Czecho-Slovakia. Will an opportunity arise at last, as a consequence of the Munich agreement?* Or shall the Powers wait until they are faced once more with the alternative of an all-destroying conflict and hasty and inconclusive negotiations? Certain miracles cannot be repeated.

6

On his return from America, in July 1937, M. van Zeeland received a letter in which his Sovereign emphasized "the importance of the mission entrusted to him, and through him to Belgium," a mission which might bring to light "the elements of a rational organisation of world economy."

"At this moment," wrote Leopold III, "when you are about to set out the preliminary results of your enquiry, allow me to make a suggestion. It is, I believe, essential to bring about the creation of an organism of economic studies the value of which would rest in its triple character of universality, permanence and independence. The object of the institution would be to discover the elements of a

* See *Appendix*.

world economic organization, and to adapt this organization to the ever-changing factors of world economy. Economic science . . . is subject to the rhythm of life, and the problems which it raises cannot receive unalterable solutions. In order to fulfil its mission, the suggested institution should be as independent as possible of national influences. It is obviously very difficult to isolate economic questions from political contingencies. But it is precisely this difficulty which is the crux of the problem with which you have to deal and on which all our efforts should be centred. . . .

“Neither the lowering of tariff barriers nor any partial measure can alone put an end to the confusion which threatens peace. If we really wish to avoid war and to bring back mankind to a more peaceful frame of mind, we must have the courage to consider the economic question in its entirety and to face the great problems which threaten mankind: distribution of raw material, distribution of the means of exchange, distribution of labour, relations between agricultural and industrial nations, and so forth. . . .

“I cherish no illusions as to the difficulty involved by the realization of such a vast programme. I am nevertheless convinced that the time is favourable to attempt it and that we may hope to secure . . . not only the support of all Governments but also the approval and help of . . . all men who sincerely wish to improve understanding and solidarity between nations.”

This letter should be placed beside the one written five years before by King Albert to M. Renkin. It reveals once more the remarkable continuity of thought which links the two monarchs together. Leopold III does not possess, perhaps, the unquenchable thirst for information nor the insatiable appetite for reading which characterized his predecessor, but he possesses the same painstaking intellectual integrity. Whenever he is prompted by circumstances

to write or speak on a subject which does not come within the range of his experience, he takes endless trouble in studying it himself, and does not rely only on expert advice. He wishes to form a personal and independent opinion on every important question affecting the State.

The King's interest in his scheme for economic appeasement has never flagged. He alluded to it during the official visit he paid to London four months later when, at the Guildhall, he expressed "the hope that Great Britain might play a prominent part in the search for a solution of the major economic difficulties" which prevented the world's recovery, and insisted that while "political objectives only concerned certain sections of mankind," the "better ordering of economic life was of interest to mankind as a whole." He referred to it once more in Paris, in October 1938, at the unveiling of the statue erected to King Albert: "Let us try to rise above petty antagonisms in order to find a practical solution of the complex problems that are holding up the progress of the world."

Even before ascending the throne Leopold III believed that Belgian interests were dependent on world interests. He was convinced that war, whatever the issue, could only aggravate economic depression. His closer experience of public affairs showed him more and more that a "policy of withdrawal and isolation" would be sterile, and that the solution of the Belgian problem depended on the solution of the European and world problems. If he returned to a new status of neutrality, it was not only in order to prevent Belgium from becoming once more the battlefield of nations; it was also because he realized that his country could not serve the common cause of civilization if she did not recover an impartial position. Now that the League had lost its authority over totalitarian States, could not a small nation whose impartiality was acknowledged on both sides render

some help in trying to reconcile conflicting interests, or at least explore the means of doing so? The example of the diplomatic activity displayed by Leopold I during the Eastern crisis of 1840 was not forgotten. In spite of her weakness, Belgium should not remain passive in the face of danger. She could only be saved from the disaster of a new conflict—and the conflict would prove disastrous whether she was involved in it or not—if she collaborated actively in the work of economic disarmament, which was one of the essential conditions of moral and material disarmament.

7

The King's letter of July 1937 attracted almost as much attention as his speech of October 1936. It showed even more independence, for this time the Sovereign did not hesitate to take part in a controversy which did not directly concern Belgian interests or security. It surprised some republicans, who imagined that royalties only "keep their throne by playing a strictly symbolic rôle", and disappointed the supporters of an exclusive League policy, who regretted that the useful work done in Geneva towards economic agreement had not been mentioned. The vast majority, however, appreciated the disinterested intentions which prompted the King's proposals and realized the difficulty of basing forthcoming negotiations on the League's authority if the support of non-League nations had to be obtained. It was precisely because the League, in its present form, had ceased to inspire confidence in the totalitarian States, whose collaboration was indispensable, that the help of an independent and neutral organization might prove useful. It is significant that while, six months before, the Reich had declined an invitation to Geneva to

discuss the question of raw materials, the German Press, and particularly the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, recognized that the Royal letter "contained proposals deserving serious attention."

The Sovereign's ideas must be considered as distinct from the van Zeeland report. This appears clearly if his letter is read in conjunction with that document. He defined his views in the course of an interview which he kindly granted the author in December 1938.

One thing stands foremost in his mind. International rivalries and political conflicts which absorb public attention and which provoke so much bitterness and prejudice are only the external aspect of the problem which confronts us. The trouble lies deeper, in the ever-recurring obstacles arising from the world's economic disorganization. "When one reflects upon the state of disorganization in which mankind is plunged," he wrote in 1937, "the future appears . . . in a very dark light." Such are still his feelings to-day. All ideologies, whether social or political, are merely the expression of this disorganization. The dangerous unrest in which we live is the natural outcome of material difficulties. It can only be cured by the gradual removal of these difficulties. Political appeasement is certainly essential, for it allows us to gain time, but it affords no lasting solution. We must strike at the root of the evil from which we suffer, and the nature of that evil is economic more than political.

What is wanted is a change in point of view. The problem should be examined, not as far as it concerns one nation or one group of nations but as mankind as a whole—and not so much mankind's ideas or social conceptions as mankind's pressing needs. If it were, it would be seen that all States, however deeply divided in other respects, have certain fundamental interests in common and might gain advantages by mutual concessions and mutual help. For

we all are interdependent; no single nation can prosper in a poverty-stricken world. This is sound economics . . . and sound Christianity. Looked at in this light, rivalries and conflicts assume saner proportions. Union can be opposed to division and the absurdity of war appears in a glaring light against a background of practical sanity.

How can such an improvement be brought about?

King Leopold is convinced that things have drifted too far to allow us to expect an early return to "normal trade." It is no longer only a question of lowering trade barriers and removing other restrictions to the exchange of goods. Such half-measures might have been helpful ten years ago, but we have reached a stage when nothing short of a complete survey of the situation can prevent failure. People speak of removing obstacles as if trade was waiting to resume its course, but trade has lost its momentum during a long period of disorganization. It must be revived through scientific organization. The whole question must be reviewed with all its implications. We must take stock of the world's resources in raw material, in capital, in labour, and examine in an impartial spirit to what extent they might be marshalled in the common interest of all.

Some differences between these views and M. van Zeeland's conclusions are already apparent. The King lays even more emphasis on the economic importance of the problem. He relies on economic changes to clear the political atmosphere rather than on political appeasement to bring about economic changes, and deplores the fact that every move made towards conciliation in one domain should have been held up by a stiffening of policy in another. It is essential to examine the economic problems, not only in the light of pre-War doctrines but in the light of present conditions. The world is too sick to be cured by palliatives.

What means should be used to bring about its recovery?

It is scarcely possible to expect that a new international conference should succeed, at this stage, when a number of similar conferences have failed in recent years. Official delegates, whatever their qualifications, are paralysed by the instructions they have received from their respective Governments. Against their better judgement, they are unable to make concessions and are not even allowed to consider certain demands, however justified. It has been shown again and again that no substantial progress can be made under such conditions. Besides, expert conferences are bound by their terms of reference; they are not free to make suggestions which have no bearing on the question submitted to them. They sit only for a short time and cannot deal with conditions which alter from month to month. For restlessness and sudden changes are the worst symptoms of the world's present sickness. Events do not wait for the drafting of the most learned report. They forestall its conclusions, which are often out of date before they are published.

Learning from experience, the King believes that an advisory body of impartial experts should prove more helpful than an official conference. As stated in his letter, this "organism of economic studies" should be "universal," "permanent" and "independent"—"universal" because its field of investigation should not be limited to certain countries or to certain aspects of the problem; "permanent" because it should be able to follow closely the rapid changes of economic and social conditions in order to formulate up-to-date conclusions at short notice on any critical question when required to do so; "independent" because it should be free from national or political bias and appreciate the situation in an impartial and purely objective spirit.

The King wishes that the new Institute should be estab-

lished in Brussels. Under her present status, Belgium is particularly well placed to act as an intermediary between the Powers. Her geographical position, her impartial attitude, the moral prestige she enjoyed during and since the War, make her a natural centre of international activity. The members of the new organization should be chosen for their scientific achievements, their practical experience and their intellectual integrity, just as the questions submitted to them should be judged on their merits, apart from any prejudice. The Institute should be consulted as an impartial body of men of unchallengeable reputation. If it did not enjoy any official power, it should at least enjoy the respect of all. Even if its decisions or conclusions did not possess any legal value, they would carry enough weight to influence public opinion and pave the way to negotiations. The Institute would, of course, rely on the assistance of other organizations which have already done invaluable work in the economic field, but there seems little doubt that such assistance would be forthcoming once it was understood that its only aim was to collect accurate information, pursue objective studies and help the Governments of the various States to reach an agreement on certain vital questions. Some time ago, King Leopold engaged a few experts to examine the causes of international differences. Their work has confirmed his thesis that the basic cause of war is economic; it has also strengthened his determination to initiate the organization of world economic research. It is for this purpose that he has founded the Research Institute of World Economy.

The King acknowledges the difficulty of preserving the independent character of the organization. As he wrote last year, "it is difficult to isolate economic questions from political contingencies; this is the crux of the problem." He is still applying himself with a few economists of Belgian

and other nationalities who share his views, to overcome this obstacle or to reduce its importance. He remains convinced that one of the worst mistakes the world has made since the War has been to lay emphasis on international politics, thus stirring up antagonism, fear and suspicion. Similar differences arise from economic problems, but these differences are of a concrete and positive nature and may be discussed without bitterness. They concern the interest of every man in every State, the very foundation on which civilization is built. It is because we ignored this elementary truth that most of the efforts made to bring nations together for the last twenty years have come to grief. We have begun where we should have ended and are endeavouring now to start again where we should have begun—in the field of economic collaboration. “Something should be done soon, for we are still at the mercy of an accident,” and the King added with a sigh, “we are living in very difficult times.”*

He had spoken with spontaneous eagerness, as a man full of his subject. He now turned away, looking through the window where the birds were clearing rapidly the food prepared for them. A sudden lassitude seemed to come over him. Was he thinking of his own destiny and how different it might have been if he had filled the part of one of his predecessors in the quiet atmosphere of the nineteenth century? Or was he not rather pondering on his responsibility as a Belgian King, as the head of a European State, wishing that he could do more to save his people, to save civilization? For four years he had struggled against internal and external difficulties without a month's complete rest. Time was needed to bring his projects to maturity. Would time be given him? Would circumstances prove at last more favourable?

* See *Appendix*.

When he turned back again, one of his rare smiles lighted up his face. "There is nothing to do", he said, "but to go on." He spoke with his father's deep voice and quiet, resolute expression. And I realized that this resolution was strengthened by an indomitable courage, a courage not entirely his own. For behind the young Sovereign stood the grave soldier, Albert I, and, further, the Empire-builder, Leopold II, and, further still, the diplomatist, Leopold I, watching over their inheritance.

As I left the room the King was already at work, bending over his papers. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

INDEPENDENT NEUTRALITY

I

THE chief event of the first years of King Leopold's reign is the return of Belgium to her traditional policy of neutrality. The new independent neutrality is somewhat different from the pre-War compulsory neutrality, but it implies the same detachment from any system of European alliance. Indeed, the guarantees given by Great Britain and France, on the one side, and by Germany on the other, are subordinated to this detached attitude and to the defence of all frontiers by the Belgian forces. The main difference, therefore, between the régime of 1831 and that of 1936 and 1937 is that the first was imposed by the Powers on a reluctant Belgium and had a permanent character, while the second has been freely adopted by the country and may be altered by her on her own initiative and responsibility.

The change in the international status of Belgium was first realized in Great Britain and France after the publication of a speech delivered by the King at a ministerial council held in Brussels on October 14th, 1936. A bill lengthening the time of service and increasing military expenses had been rejected by the Chamber at the beginning of the year. It had become particularly urgent to strengthen Belgian defences after the reoccupation of the Rhineland, but a number of deputies opposed military measures on account of the position occupied by Belgium since the denunciation of

the Locarno Treaty. Many people were prepared to accept new sacrifices if the country's defence alone were concerned, but refused to do so if she became a pawn on the European chess-board, and remained bound by obligations taken at a time when international confidence and solidarity were not gravely shaken. They urged that as long as Locarno, and more particularly the Rhine Pact, was recognized by the Reich, Belgium could continue to take part in it, as the bilateral character of the mutual guarantee allowed her to preserve an independent and disinterested attitude. It was felt that since the violation and repudiation of the Pact by Germany, in March, the country was placed in a false position and might be dragged into a conflict provoked by French policy and in which Belgian interests were not involved. In order to overcome this opposition, particularly strong in Flemish circles, and to ensure a united front during a critical period, the Sovereign felt obliged to dispel all misunderstandings.

"Our military policy and our external policy," he declared, "must not be aimed at preparing a war and a questionable victory following a coalition, but at removing war from our territory. The reoccupation of the Rhineland, by completely altering the Locarno agreements . . . has placed us again in the same international position which we held before the War. Our geographical situation compels us to maintain sufficient defensive forces to dissuade any of our neighbours from using our territory in order to attack another State. In fulfilling this mission, Belgium contributes in no mean fashion to the preservation of peace in Western Europe and obtains, *ipso facto*, the right to be respected, and eventually supported, by all States which are concerned in the preservation of peace. Within these limits, I believe that Belgian opinion will be unanimous. But no engagement should compel us to go further."

These words met with so much approval in the ministerial council that, on the suggestion of M. Vandervelde, the Socialist leader, it was decided to publish them. The surprise they provoked abroad was mainly due to the fact that, in spite of the repeated warnings of Belgian statesmen, the unavoidable consequences of the new situation in Europe were not yet fully realized.

2

As early as 1920 the one-sided military Convention with France had provoked some opposition in Belgium and in some British circles. In spite of ministerial declarations insisting on the limited character of the Convention, which never infringed upon Belgian independence and sovereignty, the expression "satellite of France" had been used again, and the Flemings resented any entanglement which appeared to link, directly or indirectly, the destinies of the two countries. The mutual character of the Rhine Pact of 1925, under the guarantee of Great Britain and Italy, had put a stop to these criticisms. Once more Belgium occupied an intermediate position consistent with her traditional policy and the dual character of her population. The conclusion of the Franco-Soviet Pact, however, revived the old suspicions and the Prime Minister, M. van Zeeland, deemed it necessary to make a full statement before the Chamber which showed that the main provisions of the Convention had become obsolete since the withdrawal of French and Belgian troops from Germany, and that all that remained was a contact between the two General Staffs concerning measures to be taken in the eventuality of an unprovoked aggression.

A week later, on March 19th, 1936, the representatives of Great Britain, France, Italy and Belgium met in London and

agreed to remain faithful to their Locarno obligations, in spite of Germany's action in the Rhineland. They made certain arrangements in the hope of concluding a new Western Pact, but preserved meanwhile the Locarno guarantees and strengthened them by consultations between the General Staffs. Germany was once more isolated and Belgium found herself involved in a one-sided system through which she was not only bound to defend her own frontiers but also those of France. This position was temporary and delay could only be justified by the assurance of an early solution of the problems raised by the crisis. Instead of improving, however, the European situation deteriorated rapidly and the hope of a settlement became more and more remote.

The coup of March 1936 had followed the conclusion of the Franco-Soviet Pact, which, with the Czechoslovakian alliance, involved France in Central and Eastern Europe, outside the circle of Belgian interests. It was further facilitated by the conflict provoked between Italy and her ex-allies by the conquest of Abyssinia. Finding himself isolated after the application of economic sanctions by the League, Mussolini turned towards the Führer for support, the Stresa front was broken, and the Rome-Berlin axis linked together the two totalitarian States. Meanwhile the influence of Soviet Russia increased within and outside the League. The revolt of Franco finally divided Europe into two rival groups, totalitarian and democratic, with Russia and Japan in the background, and political fanaticism was let loose in Spain. During the eight months which had followed the London provisory convention of March, the situation had altered completely. Germany was no longer alone, and behind the revision of Versailles and the ambition of the dissatisfied Powers loomed a still graver danger: the irreconcilable opposition of two political creeds.

No wonder that, in such an atmosphere, all attempts made at obtaining a settlement of the Western Pact failed one after another. Neither the German Plan of March 31st, nor the French Plan of April 8th, nor the British Questionnaire of May 6th produced any appreciable result. Great Britain and France were sufficiently strong, or thought themselves sufficiently strong, to await another opportunity, while Germany was fast rearming. Belgium could not afford to do so. If the threatening storm had burst upon Europe at that moment she would have found herself in the worst possible position, bound by obligations to Powers whose policy she could not influence and involved in a conflict between two political conceptions—Communism and Fascism—to which she was instinctively opposed. In the circumstances, she had no alternative but to resume her independent attitude. The only way in which she could still safeguard her security and European peace was to act once more as a neutral, keeping watch at the cross-roads of Europe. The failure of the League and of regional pacts such as Locarno—whether temporary or permanent—had brought back the Balance of Power, and the Balance of Power had automatically restored Belgian neutrality. The pendulum, swung in one direction by the shock of the War, resumed its vertical position. Belgium, which, under an ideal system of mutual guarantee, might have become one of the stones of the European edifice, became once more the keystone. She was ready to play again the part which she had played in the nineteenth century. She wished to renew the old treaties under a new form. If the Powers undertook not to violate her frontiers, she was determined to maintain sufficient defences to remove the temptation of invading her territory from the mind of a possible aggressor. Her security was the essential condition of the maintenance of peace in Western Europe, as it had been in the past.

The Belgian Government had no serious difficulty in showing that their wish to be released from their Locarno obligations was justified by events and did not alter the friendship which bound the country to her ex-allies. Once more King Leopold supported his Ministers with singular energy by coming to London, in March 1937, when he had a long interview with Mr. Eden. This talk paved the way to the Foreign Secretary's visit to Brussels, the next month, coinciding with the publication of the Franco-British declaration. In the tense atmosphere in which Europe was moving, it appeared evident that Belgium would be in a better position to fulfil her mission if she recovered her full independence and applied herself to strengthen her military and diplomatic position. This implied fresh sacrifices for the country's defence and a system of guarantees similar to those of pre-War years.

After a few months' negotiations, the British and French made, on April 24th, 1937, a joint declaration expressing their readiness to comply with Belgium's desire to determine with precision her rights and obligations "in view of her geographical position and of the delays which may still ensue in the negotiation and conclusion of a general Act destined to replace the Treaty of Locarno." The note takes into account Belgium's "determination to defend" her frontiers and to prevent that "Belgian territory should be used . . . in case of an aggression against another State, either as a passage or as a basis of operation by land, sea and air," and "to organize efficiently her defences." It recalls the assurance given by Belgium of "her loyalty to the Covenant of the League and to the obligations it involves," and finally declares that Great Britain and France will consider her henceforth as released "from any obligation towards them resulting from The Treaty of Locarno or from the arrangements concluded in London on March 19th,

1936," while "maintaining the engagements of assistance taken towards her by these same acts."

The régime of neutrality once restored, it was obvious that the guarantees should not remain one-sided. The sooner the system was completed, the better for all concerned. In his speech of January 30th, 1937, the German Chancellor had prepared the ground by saying that he was "ready to recognize" the "neutrality and inviolability" of Belgium and Holland. There were, nevertheless, certain difficulties in the way, and it was not before October 13th that a final agreement was reached with Berlin. While the British Government was favourable to the idea of settling the Belgian question as a preliminary step towards a new treaty with the ex-Locarno Powers, the French still hoped for the early conclusion of such a pact, including the German guarantee. On the other hand, it had not yet been made clear whether the Reich wished for a return to the pre-War régime of compulsory and permanent neutrality or was willing to accept the new situation on the same terms as Great Britain and France. It was only when the early conclusions of a general treaty became problematic that the Belgians resumed the negotiations with Germany, with the approval of the other Powers. They endeavoured to maintain the provisory character of the new declaration, in order not to jeopardize the chances of the contemplated Western Pact, and strove to give to the two declarations the same character and even the same wording.

The German note, after mentioning the joint declaration made by Great Britain and France in April and alluding to the "delays which the conclusion of a new treaty replacing the Locarno Pact might involve," expresses the wish to "determine the Reich's attitude towards Belgium" in order to "reinforce the pacific aspirations of both countries." Considering, first, "the policy of independence" which

Belgium "intends to follow in full sovereignty," and, secondly, her determination to defend her frontiers and to prevent another State from using her territory—(the Note repeats here, word for word, the terms of the corresponding paragraph of the Franco-British declaration)—Germany recognizes that "the inviolability and integrity of Belgium are the common interest of the Western Powers," undertakes to respect them in all circumstances, and gives a formal promise of assistance, "like Great Britain and France," in case of attack or invasion.

M. Spaak, who, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, had pursued these delicate negotiations to their successful conclusion, was supported by the great majority of his colleagues, and M. Hymans, whose name is associated with the post-War policy of Belgium and whose loyalty to the League cannot be questioned, voiced the country's satisfaction when he said in Parliament that "the German declaration was a contribution to the security of Belgium and Western Europe."

3

The Notes of 1936-37 and the Government's policy were nevertheless severely criticized in Belgium and abroad. The first reaction in certain quarters was that, impressed by the progress accomplished by Nazi Germany, the small State was deserting the Allies who had done so much to liberate its territory during the World War. As soon, however, as the declarations were published, it was made clear that, while asking to be relieved from her old engagements, Belgium had spontaneously undertaken new ones. If she wished to resume her complete independence, it was not only because it was the only status consistent with her traditional policy, it was also because she would have been unable otherwise

to organize her defences adequately. The mention made in the Franco-British declaration of the "geographical situation" of the country is important. Had the King and his Government allowed things to drift, Belgium, as the bridge-head of the Allies, was exposed to a sudden attack which would have given her conqueror hegemony in Western Europe and the access to the Channel ports. Furthermore, the contacts established between the Belgian Staff and the British and French Staffs in March 1936 might have given some justification either to an aggression from Germany or to a demand for the passage of French and British troops on their way to the Rhineland. This has now become impossible without the flagrant violation of a formal undertaking, given freely by all the Powers concerned.

The new Belgian states can only provide a full guarantee of security if the two groups of Powers which were opposed to each other during the crisis of September 1938, do not drift apart into two permanently hostile coalitions. The main cause of the break-up of the neutrality system instored in 1831, was the deep cleavage existing between the Entente and the Triple Alliance. If, once more, the guarantors of Belgium were unable to come to some understanding, stabilising the Balance of Power and dispelling economic grievances and difficulties, the position of Belgium and of all small European neutral Powers would become critical.

Neutrality is not a solution in itself, but it may prepare a solution, and allow peaceful influences on both sides to gather enough force to check aggression. The 1936-1937 declarations are not a sufficient safeguard against war in the West—they must obviously be completed by a general pact—by they are a first step in the right direction and, within their limited scope, have already rendered invaluable service. From the Franco-British point of view, they provide a guarantee that Germany will not derive any advantage from

the weakness of Belgian forces, and from the German point of view they ensure the Reich against French attack, turning the Rhine defences. It is manifestly in the interest of all Powers concerned to remain faithful to their engagements as long as Belgium remains faithful to hers by maintaining adequate defences. The value of international conventions depends not so much on their ideology as on the concrete advantages which all signatories derive from them.

4

Besides this opposition based on the strengthening of the allied front formed during the World War, the new Belgian status met with the opposition of the partisans of the system of collective security, who look unfavourably on any change which appears to restore the pre-War régime. To this school of thought, there was no alternative between the system of the League and chaos, and the Covenant must therefore be enforced with its economic sanctions and its military clauses. The disturber of the peace—that is to say, of the *status quo*—should have been suppressed in Manchuria, in the Chaco, in Abyssinia, Spain, Austria or Czechoslovakia. The fact that, since 1931, no year had passed without some fresh “aggression” which the League had been either unable or unwilling to prevent or to check was not taken into consideration. Neither was it remembered that the very efforts made in order to impose order on “satisfied” and “unsatisfied” nations alike only stiffened the attitude of the latter and linked them together into an anti-League combination just as strong if not stronger than the principal Powers still represented at Geneva. In other words, the Balance of Power which, for good or ill, has again become a reality most not be acknow-

ledged, while collective security, which has for long become a fiction, must be maintained. Instead of recognizing the shortcomings of the Covenant as an instrument destined to suppress international conflicts, and reaping some wisdom from the experience of past years, we should cling desperately to a policy which has brought us to the brink of war on several occasions, and force it upon an unwilling world. The most ardent partisans of a revision of Versailles in 1920 had become the most ardent opponents of a policy of "appeasement."

The distaste expressed by these defenders "of the Covenant, the whole Covenant and nothing but the Covenant" towards the 1936-1937 declarations, and the return of Belgium to her traditional policy, is easy to understand. Any kind of neutrality, either voluntary or compulsory, temporary or permanent, is theoretically incompatible with the system of the League as they understand it: a Parliament of Nations adopting some decisions and applying sanctions to those who do not accept them. At the time when Geneva was chosen as the seat of the League, considerable difficulties were created by the fact that Switzerland insisted on preserving a neutrality which seemed incompatible with her new obligations, and lawyers spent much time and ingenuity in turning the difficulty. It had even been arranged that this privileged State should be exempted from certain duties, such as allowing the passage of League troops through her territory. Switzerland was thus able to retain her pre-War status while entering the Assembly, "as an aviator takes a parachute when starting for a flight," to use the words of one of her representatives. This, however, was an exception, although a startling one. During the twelve years which followed Versailles, neutrality had disappeared from the diplomatic map, with the Balance of Power, "secret diplomacy" and all its works. After the signature of the

Kellogg Pact in 1928, an American statesman, Mr. Stimson, declared that since the new treaty had "outlawed" war, neutrality had become "obsolete." These words were uttered during the last wave of optimism created by the "Locarno spirit." They seem scarcely intelligible to-day, after the abrogation of the treaty and the series of changes which followed.

Nobody questions the right of a State member of the League to abstain from military action against another State, but several critics, in and outside Belgium, attacked the 1936-1937 declarations as being in contradiction with Article XVI of the Covenant, more particularly concerning the passage to be afforded "to the forces of any member of the League which are co-operating to protect the Covenant of the League." How could such a duty, they argued, be consistent with the paragraph of the Franco-British declaration mentioning Belgium's loyalty to the League and "to the obligations it involves for its members"? The fact is that Article XVI has, from the first, been interpreted differently by a number of experts. For many the granting of a passage required the same unanimity as military action and was therefore subordinated to the sovereign rights of the nation concerned. This view became more and more generally accepted as events showed how difficult it would be for the League to police the world. Leaving aside the case of Switzerland, who was exempted from this obligation as early as 1920, it must be remembered that an annex of the Treaty of Locarno states that each member of the League is only bound to act "to an extent which is compatible with its military situation and takes its geographical position into account." This paragraph was added in order to satisfy Germany, who did not wish to assume military responsibilities as long as she remained disarmed. It applies with greater force to a small State like Belgium, which does not enjoy the

advantages of strategic frontiers and which could not grant passage without becoming immediately involved in a conflict. Eleven years later, the Foreign Ministers of Denmark, Spain, Finland, Norway and Holland published a formal statement to the effect that, "as long as the Covenant was only applied incompletely . . . they were obliged to take this fact into account in their interpretation of Article XVI." Finally, on the eve of the 1938 crisis, Lord de la Warr and Mr. Butler, the British representatives at Geneva, declared that, according to their Government, "there was no unconditional obligation to take the measures" mentioned in Article XVI. This declaration was immediately followed, on September 23rd, 1938, by a joint statement of the Powers of the Oslo group confirming their intention to maintain neutrality.

In the light of these diplomatic documents, it seems evident that in taking the initiative of dispelling all misunderstandings concerning Belgian obligations in 1936, King Leopold did not undermine the prestige of the League but merely adopted the policy already followed by the majority of the small European Powers. His Government did not even ask, as Switzerland did in her memorandum of April 1938, to be released from the obligation of applying economic sanctions. The Reich never required from Belgium any assurance in this respect and the German declaration of October 1937 mentions explicitly that account has been taken of the "public statements made by the Belgian Government regarding the international position of Belgium," including its firm resolution to remain faithful to all the articles of the Covenant which are consistent with her independence and neutrality; in other words, to the Covenant as it stands to-day according to the views expressed by the majority of its adherents, including Great Britain.

The position was lucidly summed up by M. Spaak in the

course of a debate in the Belgian Chamber in which he said that Belgium could only recognize the right of passage under two conditions: the first that it should never be imposed upon her, the second that it should only be given in case of a "common action" in which the neighbours of Belgium should take part.

5

If any doubts remained in 1936 concerning the wisdom of the policy pursued by Belgium, they were soon dispelled during the following years.

It will be remembered that the King's speech of October had been prompted by the necessity of obtaining additional credits for the country's defence and of lengthening the period of military service. Leopold III had not forgotten the warnings given repeatedly to the nation by King Albert, at a time when it was still possible to hope for an early limitation of armaments. He remembered his father's efforts in 1927, to prevent Parliament from further reducing the Belgian effectives, by the adoption of a six months' period of service, and his anxiety to see the system of defences adopted in 1933 for the protection of the eastern frontier and the Meuse efficiently completed. Eight months after his accession, when celebrating the anniversary of the battle of the Yser, King Leopold had once more emphasized the urgency of completing the country's new defensive organization, in spite of the opposition expressed in certain quarters. He had spoken with no uncertain voice of the danger of pursuing such polemics and of undermining the country's unity: "The Government has adopted and Parliament has passed a plan reforming our military organization, which

has been, is and will be carried out." It was essential, he said, that the defence of the territory should start near the frontier, according to the views already expressed by his predecessor twenty years before, during the period which immediately preceded the invasion.* "Such a conception," he added with prophetic instinct, "corresponds to the country's interests . . . and to an international status freed from all tutelage, in harmony with a tradition which has given us eighty-four years of uninterrupted peace." It is significant that, two years before the abrogation of Locarno, the Sovereign should have foreseen that Belgium would be obliged to return to a completely independent and neutral policy and to depend upon her own resources. The Royal speech of October 1936, six months after the occupation of the Rhineland, confirms the views expressed at a time when Locarno still appeared as the permanent guarantee of Belgian security.

The plan of fortifications which had provoked so much discussion and which is being completed to-day aims, first of all, at preventing the recurrence of the invasion of 1914. The erection of the well-known Maginot line, on the French eastern frontier, and of the new German defences which run parallel to it, would render the position of Belgium as precarious as before, in case of conflict, if her army were not well trained and equipped and if the present disposition of her defensive works did not allow it to oppose a serious resistance in the threatened area on the Meuse. The Schlieffen plan of 1904 rested on the assumption that the Belgians would submit to the German demand of passage, or retire on Antwerp as soon as they realized the overwhelming superiority of the forces opposed to them. In order to prevent foreign armies from choosing Belgium as their battle-field, it was essential to erect along the eastern frontier and

* See p. 250.

around the key positions of Liège and Namur a series of works which would so delay the advance as to allow the guaranteeing Powers to send their reinforcements, not after the invasion, as in 1914, but before invasion had made serious progress. To refer once more to the King's speech of October 1936, Belgium should possess an army sufficiently strong "to impose respect" on all, and use this army so that it should exert its full action "on the boundaries of the territory."

A first line of small fortified works runs along the eastern frontier, commanding the principal roads from Maeseyck in the north to the region of Arlon in the extreme south of the Luxemburg province. A second line, much stronger than the first, protects Liège and the crossing of the Meuse at Visé. It is prolonged to the north towards Antwerp by the new Albert Canal which affords a natural obstacle. The third line is formed by the position of Liège with six forts on the right bank of the Meuse and two on the left. The southern frontier has not been neglected and the old forts around Namur are being transformed. Adequate measures will be taken to render the valley of the Meuse, if not impregnable at least useless for any surprise attack.

The military reforms of December 1936, which were accepted without reluctance by Parliament, after the independent policy of the Government had been clearly defined, have already borne fruit. The number of men and officers under the colours, which was only 67,700 in 1935, has been considerably enlarged by the extension of the period of military service to seventeen months. It reached 90,000 in 1938. Expenses grew proportionately from 766 million to 1,146 million francs. A new law passed in June 1937 allowed for the gradual increase up to 24 per cent. of the number of officers. Measures were taken to mobilize State and local governments' employees and to convert peace into

war industries; various "offices" were created to organize supplies, transport and air raid precautions, in case of emergency. Although these preparations were not completed in September 1938, they were sufficiently advanced to give the Belgians the feeling that, if their frontier were once more violated, they would not this time be taken by surprise.

6

In April 1937 M. Spaak made it clear that the Anglo-French declaration had ended, for Belgium, the "period of military agreements." There only remained one possible reason for war, namely, "national defence." Belgian military problems had been "freed from any political significance which they might have had under previous undertakings." Belgium still wished to "contribute to the collective organization of peace and the elaboration of international law," but her main task in that direction was "to cover the battle-field of Europe with such obstacles that even the boldest would recoil from them."

Eighteen months later, Europe was brought to the brink of war by the Czechoslovakian crisis. It was exactly the kind of contingency which the King had foreseen when he proclaimed his determination to return to an independent and neutral status. Had the Government taken no initiative in 1936, and allowed matters to drift, Belgium would have been involved in the conflict as a partner of England and France, under her Locarno obligations. A large number of Belgians would have resented any military action taken on account of France's obligations towards Czechoslovakia. Many Walloons, on the other hand, would have been favourable to this action or, at any rate, to any facility which would enable the French to use Belgian

territory in their operations against the Reich. The unity of the country would have been undermined, her obligations ill-defined. She would have been exposed to stand the full weight of a German attack and to fight, not for her existence or her independence but for the maintenance of the Versailles system which she had had no share in creating. Worse still, Germany might this time have justified her action, not by bogus "military conversations," as in 1915, but by the concerted action taken by the British, French and Belgian Staffs since March 1936.

Not only would the civil population have been divided on the issue, but it is very doubtful whether military preparations could have been pushed forward as quickly as they were, owing to the opposition of a large number of deputies to any measure which had not a purely defensive character. The military problem, instead of being centred on the protection of Belgian territory, might have been complicated by some concerted action to be taken with the allied Powers. To diplomatic weakness and uncertainty would have been added strategic confusion, to disunion among the people and disunion among their leaders.

What really did take place in Belgium during the September crisis? National union asserted itself as it had never done since the death of Albert I. All citizens, without distinction of party or language, rallied round the Government. The Rexists and Flemish Nationalists offered spontaneously their services to the Sovereign. The only members of the Opposition who kept aloof were a small group of Communists. As in France and England, they were hostile to all negotiations with the totalitarian countries and to the Belgian neutral attitude which favoured these negotiations.

For the events of September 1938 fully confirmed King Leopold's belief that his country would now be in a better

position to render service to her ex-allies than if she had remained bound to them by military conventions. The army was prepared; between 270,000 and 300,000 men were called up; mobilization took place in perfect order; the troops took their positions along the German and French frontiers. They found, in front of them, strong German and French forces, evidently sent there to parry a possible attack through Belgium and deliver a counter-attack if necessary. But the frontier was well guarded. Belgium had undertaken to remain neutral and had received guarantees from both sides. Both sides respected their engagement to the eleventh hour, and part of the French and German troops stationed along the Belgian frontier were transferred elsewhere. It is impossible to say what might have happened after a few months' conflict, but everything points to the fact that Belgian territory would not have suffered invasion at the beginning of hostilities. The French did not entertain any false belief in a right or faculty of passage or, if they did, this belief was soon dispelled. Herr Hitler did not follow the example of William II, and confirmed his previous undertaking to respect Belgian neutrality if it was not infringed by others. The situation was far more reminiscent of 1870 than of 1914.

This is not a source of satisfaction for Belgium alone. By declaring her intentions in 1936, she safeguarded at the same time her own interests and those of all European States, more particularly of those which had not completed their military preparations. She acted once more as a screen between the Powers opposed to each other. Whatever opinion historians and publicists may entertain of the rights and wrongs of the negotiations pursued at Munich, they must agree that one of the arguments which weighed on the side of a peaceful solution was the practical impossibility of protecting Czechoslovakia from destruction, on the one

hand, or of breaking through France's defences on the other. The imminent danger of war would have been considerably increased if the German Staff had intended to resume the Schlieffen plan, and hoped to reach Paris within a month, or, conversely, if the French Staff had wished to avail itself of the "passage" through Belgium in order to turn the new defences confronting the Maginot line. A weak Belgium, with ill-defined obligations, would have allowed the two armies to come to grips and avoid the long and costly struggle which must necessarily have delayed their action on the Alsace-Lorraine front. A strong Belgium, with guarantees on both sides, closed the door on the hopes of the partisans of a violent solution of the dispute. Once more, neutrality strengthened the hands of the advocates of peaceful negotiations. Although it was not mentioned at the time, it was one of the determining factors of the Munich agreement. "Our geographical position," the King had said two years before, "compels us to maintain sufficient forces to dissuade any of our neighbours from using our territory in order to attack another State. In fulfilling this mission, Belgium collaborates . . . in the preservation of peace in Western Europe." In other words, neutrality, as far as Belgium is concerned, is not a selfish policy; it is the only policy which may prevent a new conflict, the indispensable keystone of peace.

Speaking in the Chamber on October 5th M. Spaak declared: "If during these tragic weeks I have several times considered the eventuality of war, I always believed that our country would be able to avoid it, and that the promises which have been given her would be kept." He congratulated the army and the civil population on their steadfast attitude and expressed his "joy at seeing Flemings and Walloons closely united, rise unanimously to defend their country." Unity had been restored; the people had rallied round their

Sovereign: "Those who have been near him during these days have found in him the same great virtues of calm courage, the same ardent patriotism, the same faithfulness to the given word which made Albert I, in August 1914, the very centre of our resistance."

7

It may be objected that complete "unanimity," even concerning foreign policy, is only a parliamentary expression, meaning the vast majority of the people. Out of 2,300,000 electors in 1936, there were 143,000 Communists, who remain hostile on principle. To this number may be added a certain number of Socialists and Liberals, particularly in intellectual circles, who still regret that Belgium should have given up the policy of collective security, which appears to them as the only possible solution of international problems. There is, however, no common ground between those who wish to use the League of Nations as a means of disrupting social order and those who wish to restore the policy of military sanctions. The latter are justified in regretting past errors and lost opportunities, but these academic discussions do not interest the mass of the people. They rally round the Government because they feel that reality should be faced and that all measures should be taken to counter its dangers. They have learnt, by bitter experience, that war, even a victorious war, only brings economic depression. They are not likely to forget that treaties concluded in a warlike spirit can only sow the seed of fresh conflicts. There is no other alternative left but to work for the conclusion of a new constructive peace while preparing for emergencies.

The present Belgian policy is also exposed to the criticism

of those who will only see in it a repetition of the dangerous principle: *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. The only answer which can be given to this obvious objection is that armaments, especially in modern days, are the consequence of international differences and distrust, and that they can only be reduced when these differences are removed. As long as an approximate equality of strength does not exist, a fair solution of international problems cannot be reached and the conviction that "war does not pay" cannot sink in the mass-consciousness of nations. Previous to 1914, negotiations failed because Imperial Germany considered herself stronger than any Power or combination of Powers. After 1918 the same failure was due to the refusal of the victorious States to limit their own armaments and to allow Germany to treat with them on a footing of equality. Reasonable solutions can only be found in a state of equilibrium. King Albert said once: "Disarmament will never take place as long as the Balance of Power is not restored." The failure of the 1934 conference at Geneva showed him a good prophet. Inequality breeds dissension between nations as between classes. The fact is too often overlooked that several European conflicts have received a peaceful solution when this condition of equilibrium has been fulfilled.

From this point of view the Czechoslovakian crisis presents some analogy with the negotiations which brought about the consolidation of Belgian independence in 1830-1831. The dual kingdom of the Netherlands had been created at Vienna, as the Czechoslovakian republic was created at Versailles, and for the same purpose, as a bulwark against the vanquished—in this case Napoleonic France. A conflict threatened, the Conservative Powers—Austria, Russia and Prussia—supporting the Dutch, and the Liberal Powers—England and France—supporting the Belgians. But no conflict took place because the relative forces of the

two groups, combined with the unrest prevailing in Europe, made conditions unfavourable. The general feeling was, after the exhaustion following the Napoleonic wars, that the game was not worth the candle. The soldiers' marching orders were cancelled and the diplomats gathered in London.

There are still serious reasons to doubt whether the solutions reached in Munich in 1938 will produce the same lasting effects as the solution reached in London a century before, and whether the new Czechoslovakia and the surrounding States will be able to remain sufficiently independent to prevent an outbreak between Moscow and Berlin. As far as Western Europe is concerned, however, neutrality has once more asserted itself. Following the Belgian example, Switzerland defined her attitude within the League and obtained a German guarantee in May 1938. The joint declaration made at Geneva on September 23rd by the Oslo Powers is highly significant. After reminding the Assembly of the interpretation given to Article XVI by the delegates of Great Britain a few days before, the "delegations of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Luxemburg and Norway, the Netherlands and Sweden" confirmed their previous declarations that their countries' obligations, concerning sanctions, were purely optional; in other words, that these obligations were no longer incompatible with the neutral attitude they wished to adopt during the international crisis and the conflict which might follow it.

The Oslo Powers were already bound by an economic entente since 1930. The joint declaration of 1938 might be a first step towards this political entente between the small western States of Europe foreshadowed by King Albert, which would give them a far greater influence in European affairs and consolidate their security.

Pending the settlement of the various problems which still divide the great Powers, and the reform of the League which

might follow such a settlement, the most urgent need is to prevent the recurrence of a crisis which might once more exasperate political fanaticism on both sides and block the way to negotiations. The smaller States of Europe—and more particularly Belgium—have therefore an important part to play in the immediate future by maintaining a strong neutral barrier between the rival groups.

The history of Belgium from 1831 to 1936 may be described as a long journey from a compulsory to a voluntary neutrality. The status imposed upon her, and later accepted by her with blind confidence, was wrecked by the 1914 invasion. It has been restored provisionally in a new form by the failure of the system of Versailles to bring stability to Europe, and the helplessness of the League to maintain or enforce order in a divided world. When a real "Concert of Powers" is restored, within the League or otherwise, Belgian neutrality may once more become "obsolete," but as long as suspicions and rivalries prevail, it remains an invaluable safeguard to peace—the Keystone of Western Europe.

APPENDIX

EVENTS have moved so fast since this book was written that a few words must be added to bring it up to date.

In March the Coalition Government under the Premiership of M. Spaak was obliged to resign and, after trying vainly to form a new Cabinet, King Leopold dissolved the Chamber and fixed April 2nd as the date of the next elections. The crisis provoked a great deal of comment abroad because, in the present restless state of Europe, all political quarrels assume exaggerated proportions. It was believed that the trouble arose from linguistic differences between Flemings and Walloons, when, as a matter of fact, the pretext of the conflict—the nomination of an ex-activist doctor to the Flemish Academy—affected the large majority of the people, irrespective of language or party.

In a public letter explaining and justifying his action, the Sovereign spoke of the "interference of organizations without legal standing in the making and unmaking of Governments." This abuse of party politics had been denounced by King Albert nine years before, when he had refused M. Jaspar's resignation on the ground that Ministers should depend on Parliament and not on their party headquarters.

Considering the relative strength of parties and the financial difficulties facing the country, a Coalition Cabinet seems the best form of Government in Belgium. The 1936 elections returned to the Chamber seventy Socialists, sixty-three Catholics, twenty-three Liberals, twenty-one Rexists, sixteen Flemish Nationalists (federalists) and nine Communists, and maintained in power a three-party Cabinet,

first under M. van Zeeland, later under MM. Janson and Spaak. But the work of this government has been constantly hampered by the influence of party organizations which resented the concessions made by Ministers to their colleagues in order to preserve union. Crises were provoked, not so much by differences of opinion within the Cabinet, as by differences between Ministers and prominent members of their own party.

King Leopold also urged the Belgians to abstain from indulging in internal strife as long as the foreign situation remained threatening. Within a few days, events showed how timely was this warning. The effect of the tension provoked by the occupation of Prague by German troops was immediate. The electoral campaign was waged neither on the linguistic nor on the financial issue; every leader—with the exception of the Flemish Nationalists and Communists—emphasizing the patriotic character of his programme, which was supposed to coincide in every particular with the advice given in the Royal letter. The Socialists denounced the danger of deflation, but no party proclaimed its intention of realizing unpopular economies.

To the best of their ability and in spite of the confusion of internal politics, the Belgian electors expressed their desire for national union and their distaste for all disintegrating forces, whether federalist or extremist. The Catholic *bloc* and the Liberals won ten seats—respectively, seventy-three and thirty-three—the Socialists lost six (sixty-four) and the Rexists sixteen (four). The Communists remained stationary in spite of Socialist losses, and the Flemish Nationalists, who were supposed to win thousands of votes over the Martens affair, only increased their number by one (seventeen instead of sixteen). The results of the 1936 elections were thus entirely reversed, to the benefit of the parties of the Centre and at the expense of the Rexists.

There is no question about the soundness of Belgian public opinion, but the solution of the financial problem is bound to cause further difficulties. After the dissolution, as before, the conflict between deflationists and inflationists must be solved one way or the other. It would be possible to form to-day a Catholic-Liberal alliance for the purpose of realizing urgent economies, but the present situation seems to require more than ever the maintenance of a full Coalition including the Socialists.

* * * * *

At the beginning of March 1939, King Leopold's hopes of political appeasement and economic collaboration between the European Powers seemed at last to meet with more favourable circumstances. The Spanish question ceased to be a thorn in the flesh of Europe. The danger of conflict between France and Italy in the Mediterranean seemed more remote. British and French industrialists were leaving, or preparing to leave, for Berlin, in the hope of concluding profitable arrangements with their German competitors, and British Cabinet Ministers were already speaking of the next Disarmament Conference.

A week later, everything which had been planned since Munich came to naught, owing to the partition and occupation of Czechoslovakia, and the various moves and counter-moves which followed. For the time being the method of direct negotiations between the Entente and the Axis has been superseded by the infinitely more dangerous method of alliances and defensive pacts in Eastern as well as Western Europe. If Belgium feels once more at the mercy of political currents which she is powerless to control, she may at least also feel some comfort in having recovered her full independence, now that the groups of States which divide Europe are again drifting into opposite camps.

There seem only two possible conclusions to the present deadlock. Either the Balance of Power will be sufficiently restored through diplomatic activity to persuade the rival parties to gather once more round the Conference table, or the world will be subjected to a new conflagration.

We need not dwell on the second alternative and its consequences for larger and smaller States, whether actually engaged in the conflict or not.

If, on the other hand, negotiations are one day resumed in a calmer atmosphere, it will be recognized that, according to King Leopold's views, the fundamental difficulties against which the world has been struggling since the War are financial and economic, and that an improvement in social conditions through a system of international collaboration can alone lower the obstacles which bar the way to peace. For twenty years the most experienced students of international affairs in Europe and America have insisted that the problem which threatens civilization must be estimated in Labour, Capital and raw material. For twenty years these questions have been shelved and neglected because the nations' interests were absorbed by political quarrels, conflicting ideologies and legal discussions.

Again and again the voice of reason has been raised only to be drowned, on one side or the other, by violent reproaches and indignant clamours. After Munich, people said that certain miracles cannot be repeated. It is nevertheless on the repetition of such a miracle that the fate of our civilization depends to-day.

April, 1939.

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